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Global State of Inclusion in Education: A Review of the Literature

Special Olympics Global Center
for Inclusion in Education

Jacqueline Jodl, PhD & Maya Bian

Student athlete participates in Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools acitivity

SPECIAL OLYMPICS
GLOBAL CENTER
FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

A Special Olympics Bharat supporter shares a moment of joy with a Young Athlete at a Unified event

About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education began in 2020 as a conceptual framework: it would serve as a centralized resource of support for the expanding network of Special Olympics Unified Schools with their three components of school-based Unified Sports®, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole-School Engagement. The foundational goal of the Global Center is to illuminate, broaden, and intensify the impact of the 2019 World Games in Abu Dhabi by driving targeted, grassroots change for social inclusion across the globe using the Middle East/North Africa Region as a base. This work includes serving as a hub for evaluation research on inclusive programming, as well as for basic research on the development of inclusive mindsets across cultures. To help achieve this goal, the Center supports a series of research and policy briefs on topics critical to inclusion in education. These briefs bring Special Olympics experts together with thought partners in the research and policy fields related to education and youth development and their intersection with Unified Sports programming.

About the Authors

Jacqueline Jodl is the Chief of Global Youth and Education at Special Olympics International. Before joining Special Olympics, Jackie was an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, focusing on social-emotional development, education innovation, and race and education. Previously, she was an Executive Director at The Aspen Institute, where she oversaw one of the Institute's most critical endeavors in education. Jackie earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, MBA from the University of Chicago, master's degree from Teachers College, and PhD from Columbia University.

Maya Bian is a Princeton in Asia Fellow at Population Services International, Laos, where she works at the intersection of global health and social policy. Her previous work as a Research Fellow at Special Olympics International–Global Youth and Education ignited her interest in being an advocate for the health, education, and livelihoods of people with intellectual disabilities. Maya earned a BA from the University of Tennessee and an MA from the Yenching Academy of Peking University.

Global State of Inclusion in Education: A Review of the Literature

Foreword

Globally, nearly 240 million children ages 0-17 are living with disabilities.[1] Children with intellectual disabilities routinely encounter ostracism and bullying. Social isolation, stigma, and shame are the norm. They grow up apart and unequal, their gifts and abilities rejected, their vast potential thwarted. Only about 40 percent of low- and middle-income countries have education budgets for children with disabilities. More than 85 percent of such children who are primary-age and out of school have never gone to school. The marginalization of children with disabilities in educational settings can lead to severe ramifications across all aspects of their lives, including for their health, livelihood, and social participation, as well as their sense of belonging. And as children languish, countries pay an economic price. According to the World Bank,[2] excluding people with disabilities from educational and other opportunities may lower a country's GDP by 3 percent to 7 percent.

Among policy makers and education practitioners, inclusive education has emerged as a key concept to address the exclusion of children with disabilities—as well as other marginalized populations such as gender and ethnic minorities—from mainstream education systems. In the past 30 years, governments and international organizations have increasingly voiced their support for inclusive education, enshrining it in international agreements. Most critical among these agreements are the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in 1994;[3] Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006;[4] CRPD General Comment No. 4 in 2016, which elaborated on the practical implications of implementing inclusive education;[5] and Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030.[6]

Yet despite widespread support for the ideals of inclusive education, the available data reveal that millions of children with disabilities continue to be denied their right to education. In the most recent and comprehensive effort to standardize and document such data, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that children with disabilities are nearly 50 percent more likely than their peers without disabilities to have never attended school, and that children with *severe* disabilities are almost four times more likely than their peers without disabilities to have never attended school.[7] Other sources suggest that specifically in low- and middle-income countries, as many as half of all children with disabilities who are of primary and lower-secondary school age do not attend school, making them five times more likely to be out of school than their peers without disabilities—and this disparity only increases with education level.[8] Even when children with intellectual disabilities are in integrated educational settings, the reality for many is that they continue to be marginalized and isolated. These disparities also negatively impact students without intellectual disabilities, for inclusive learning environments help those students as well to develop their social-emotional learning skills and help schools improve the climate for learning, which in turn translate into improved academic performance.

As proclaimed by the CRPD, inclusive education is a right. But as demonstrated by child development experts around the world, social inclusion—both in and out of school— is a basic human need. For more than 50 years, Special Olympics has been erasing the artificial line that divides children. In thousands of schools in 152 countries, Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools programming uses the power of sport to break down the walls of exclusion and segregation and to promote educational, social, and recreational inclusion. Our view is simple, and our focus is clear: if we teach children with and without intellectual disabilities to play together, they can learn, grow, and ultimately live together.

While education systems have made strides in renovating schools and facilities to achieve better physical inclusion, progress on social inclusion is urgently needed. Special Olympics has called on all governments to allocate three percent of their education funding to high-quality, evidence-based inclusionary practices that fully integrate students with intellectual disabilities into school communities. People with intellectual disabilities represent three percent of the population. Allocating three percent of education budgets to develop programs that increase social inclusion is an indisputably fair and logical starting point for governments to support this programming.

This brief aims to provide an overview of the global state of disability inclusion in educational settings—and of the progress that has been achieved to date. As demonstrated by the evidence, much work still needs to be done. While many countries have made significant strides to meet the needs of children with intellectual disabilities, many others have not taken even the first steps. And no nation has come close to achieving the widespread scale of truly inclusive classrooms and school communities where children with intellectual disabilities are valued as full members of their school communities. Negative attitudes around disability afflict every society and community. The need is great and the time to act is now. Wasting time means wasting lives.

– Jacqueline Jodl, PhD, Chief, Global Youth & Education, Special Olympics International

Approaches Toward Educating Children with Disabilities

Across history and geography, individual governments have adopted one or more of three standard approaches towards educating children with disabilities—segregation, integration, and inclusion. Although outwardly repudiated by contemporary governments, in too many cases children with disabilities still experience yet a fourth approach—*exclusion*, wherein they are intentionally or unintentionally denied access to educational opportunity. Officially, however, modern education systems are typically characterized by the use of the three aforementioned grouping strategies, alone or in combination, with each underpinned by a different philosophy.

The first approach, *segregation*, entails the education of children with disabilities in environments that isolate them from their peers without disabilities—either in separate classrooms within the same school or in "special schools" intended solely for children with disabilities.[9] The reasoning behind this approach has historically been that children with disabilities would benefit from the provision of specialized resources and support for their particular impairments or needs.[10] However, this approach is no longer acceptable. Today, the education community broadly views segregation as tantamount to discrimination that is based on a perceived or medically diagnosed disability and that fails to recognize individual ability and circumstance.[11]

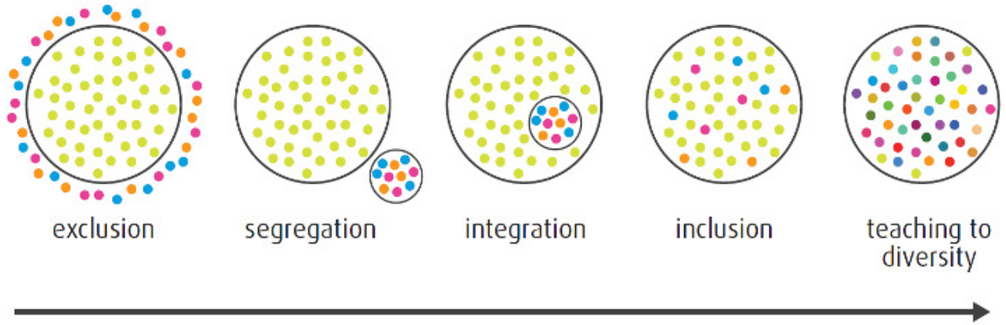
The second approach, *integration*, involves the placement of children with disabilities within the schoolrooms of mainstream educational settings, alongside their peers without disabilities. By and large, integration does not involve changes in school practices, structures, or curricula. Instead, it asks that students with disabilities either adapt to the existing education system or otherwise not participate.[12] While this approach may work in educating some children with disabilities, the needs of others go almost totally unaddressed, and many more children are positioned for likely failure by being expected to learn without the type or extent of support they need in order to succeed.[13]

Various countries and non-state actors have differing interpretations of the third approach, *inclusion*. According to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, the fundamental principle of inclusive schools is that "all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have."[14] Inclusion entails a whole-scale transformation of school systems, cultures, and practices to accommodate the wide range of needs of all students, recognizing that each individual—regardless of disability or other identity—has the capacity to learn and grow through educational opportunity.[15] Through the promotion of inclusion in education, children with disabilities become a part of both their school community and, by extension, society as a whole.

As portrayed in Figure 1, diversity and inclusion can be understood along a continuum. Inclusive education does not mean catering to students who are diverse from others. Instead, inclusion recognizes each student's unique characteristics, strengths, and needs. A continuum ultimately can lead to a model of teaching in which the diversity of students in our multicultural communities and world is acknowledged and valued.[16]

Figure 1

Continuum Toward Inclusion



Note: From *Implementing inclusion in BC's public schools: Report on the June 14, 2017, Inclusive Education Summit* (p. 3), by Inclusion BC, 2018 (https://inclusionbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Implementing_Inclusion_Education.pdf).

As evidence mounts to show that inclusive practices can benefit students without disability, inclusion is increasingly seen more broadly as an educational approach that benefits and supports *all* students.[17] By adopting flexible curricula and instilling practices that are responsive and personalized to individual student needs, inclusive schools create welcoming environments for not only children with disabilities, but also other children at risk of being left behind in school, such as those who are gender, ethnic, racial, or linguistic minorities or who have experienced trauma, poverty, or war.[18]

The Value of Inclusive Education

Over the past few decades, an increasing number of international organizations have advocated that governments shift their education systems to align with inclusive practices. In particular, the World Health Organization, the Global Partnership for Education, and various agencies of the United Nations have argued that inclusive education is valuable from educational, social, economic, and rights-based perspectives.[19]

Beginning with an examination of the education perspective, the methods of teaching adopted by inclusive schools often address the wide range of differences in student learning needs, leading to all students experiencing the benefits of those methods. Research has

demonstrated this to be the case, wherein children with disabilities who attend inclusive schools are more likely to report positive academic outcomes than those who don't,[20] and children without disabilities are likely either to benefit academically from inclusive education or at least not be negatively affected by it.[21]

A meta-analysis of two dozen studies, fielded between 1980 and 2013, demonstrated greater overall gains in academic outcomes among students with special needs when included in mainstream education, compared to their peers with similar difficulties in segregated classrooms.[22] In addition, children with learning disabilities and developmental disorders have been shown to develop better academic outcomes and more improved social skills in inclusive settings. For example, students with Down syndrome who attend integrated mainstream classrooms, compared with those who attend segregated special education settings, were found to have better expressive language and literacy skills and fewer behavioral challenges.[23]

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The social and emotional benefits of inclusive education practices are clear for students both with and without ID. Research shows when students are taught to play and learn together—whether on the playing field or in the classroom—all students benefit. Learning settings become richer with reduced fear, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination as well as increased tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and appreciation. Schools also experience decreased bullying, more trusting student relationships with teachers and staff, improved peer-to-peer relationships, and students who are more helpful and empathetic toward peers with ID. These findings are affirmed by what Special Olympics sees in its own programs incorporating social-emotional learning, with consistent results across diverse cultural contexts and geographies spanning China, Greece, India, Kenya, and the U.S., among other countries.[24] Indeed, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action asserts that: "Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all."[25]

The economic impacts of inclusion vs. exclusion in education have been studied from multiple angles. While additional empirical research is needed to examine the magnitude and scope of exclusion costs and the impact of inclusive educational interventions, a strong theoretical basis supports the economic returns stemming from inclusion. Inclusive education offers the potential for greater efficiencies due to streamlining education systems into a single, inclusive structure, which is more cost-efficient than creating a parallel structure involving mainstream schools and special schools.[26]

A large body of work examined the costs of inclusive settings for students with special needs between the 1990s and the early 2000s and found that inclusive school settings actually reduce costs compared with special schools.[27] More generally, past work by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that inclusive settings are recognized to be less expensive than segregated ones, based on the funding allocated to regular vs. special schools.[28] The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also reports that even though stakeholders often perceive the effort of including traditionally excluded groups into mainstream education as being costly, inclusion frequently entails making just minor adjustments to accommodate all learners.[29]

Inclusion also affects long-term economic benefits related to employment and poverty avoidance.[30] People with disabilities are disproportionately unemployed and have a high dependency on social grants.[31] The available evidence likely underestimates the true extent of poverty among people with disabilities, given that people with disabilities often incur additional expenses related to their disability (e.g., assistive devices, extra transportation) and thus may require a higher minimum threshold to meet basic needs.[32] Failure to address the nexus between disability and poverty will undoubtedly stall progress towards national and international economic growth and development. By being provided access to education through inclusion, children with disabilities are more likely to secure sustained employment and stay out of poverty as adults, contributing to their productivity and a country's GDP.[33]

Specific country examples from middle-income countries provide additional information, in terms of quantitative estimates of such gains. A study from the Philippines notes that increased schooling is associated with higher earnings, generating an economic rate of return from education of more than 25 percent.[34] In China it was estimated that each additional year of schooling for people with disabilities led to a wage increase of more than five percent in rural areas and nearly eight percent in urban areas.[35]

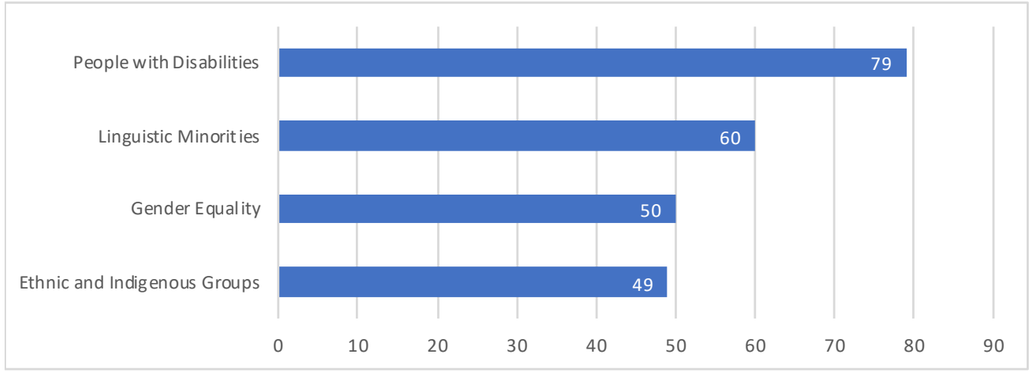
While strong educational, social, and economic justifications for inclusive education do exist, they are not sufficient unto themselves. Rather, the most compelling and fundamental argument for inclusive education is that effective education is a basic human right of every child. All children require support in varying ways, and inclusion in education fosters environments that can provide such support and treat all children with the universal dignity they deserve.

Global Progress in Implementing Disability-Inclusive Education Law and Policy

Countries vary widely in their laws and policies on inclusive education. While inclusion in education is internationally upheld as a broad vision encompassing the right to education of all children regardless of background, national legislation largely invokes inclusive education in the context of educating children with disabilities. According to UNESCO, only 5 countries—Chile, Italy, Luxembourg, Paraguay, and Portugal—have codified inclusive education as a system to address the needs of all children, and only 16 countries broadly refer to "inclusive education" in their general education laws.[36] On the whole, laws falling under education ministries usually target specific marginalized groups, with people with disabilities mentioned more frequently than other groups (Figure 2).[37]

Figure 2

Percent of Laws That Refer to Education in Relation to Specific Groups

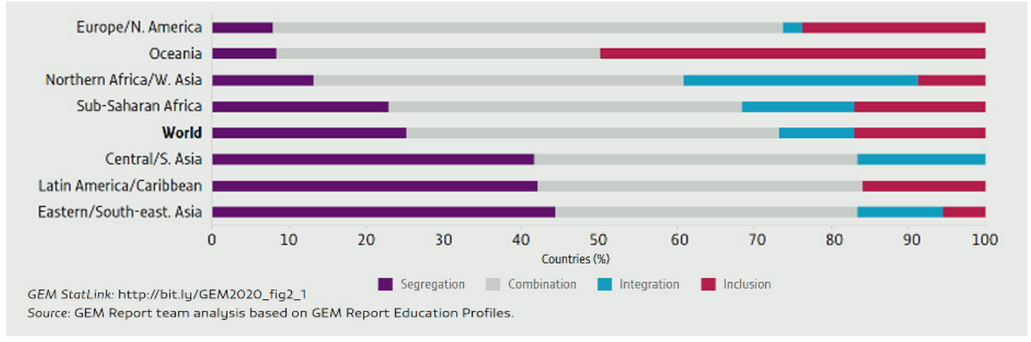


Note: Data sourced from *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all* (pp. 32, 34), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020, (http://bit.ly/2020gemreport). CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO.

As for approaches toward education of children with disabilities in particular, no single country has fully shifted its education laws and policies to an inclusive approach. Instead, most countries have a mixture of all three education approaches—segregation, integration, and inclusion—in their legal provisions and policy frameworks, which can impede the implementation of a cohesive education system. In UNESCO's analysis of the state of inclusion in the education laws of 209 countries and territories, almost half of the countries specify partial segregation of children with disabilities; a quarter emphasize full segregation—particularly countries in East/Southeast Asia, Central/South Asia, and Latin America/Caribbean; 10 percent of the countries emphasize integration; and 17 percent advocate disability-inclusive education, most prominently countries in Oceania and Europe/North America (Figure 3).[38]

Figure 3

Distribution of Countries by School Organization for Students With Disabilities, as Defined in Education Law, by Region, 2020

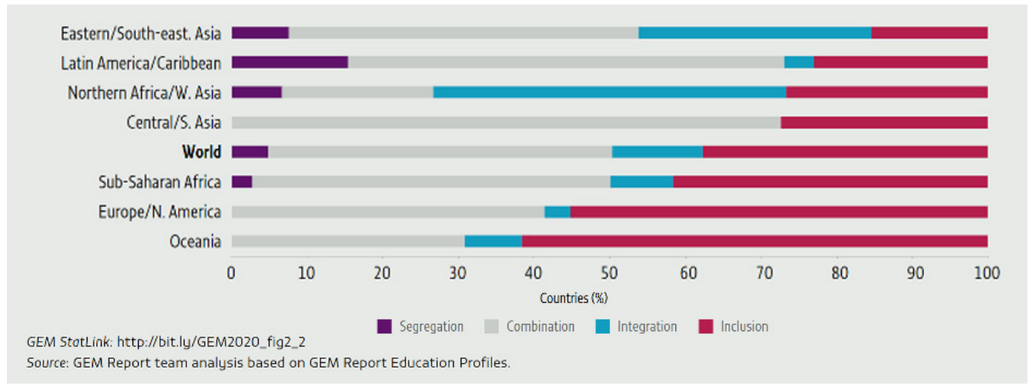


Note: From *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all* (p. 36), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020, (http://bit.ly/2020gemreport). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

In contrast to laws, policy frameworks have been quicker to move toward inclusive education across all regions. While almost 50 percent of all countries still have policy provisions for partial segregation of children with disabilities, only 5 percent of all countries have policy provisions for full segregation, while 12 percent have policy provisions for integration, and almost 40 percent have established inclusive education policies (Figure 4).[39]

Figure 4

Distribution of Countries by School Organization for Students With Disabilities, as Defined in Policy, by Region, 2020



Note: From *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all* (p. 39), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020, (http://bit.ly/2020gemreport). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS

In this section of the brief, the progress achieved toward implementing inclusive education is organized by global region, including a description of the extent to which each region has emphasized inclusion in its education policies. Along with a general overview, each regional analysis includes case studies of selected countries in order to shed light on the roles of both governmental and non-state actors in pursuing inclusion.

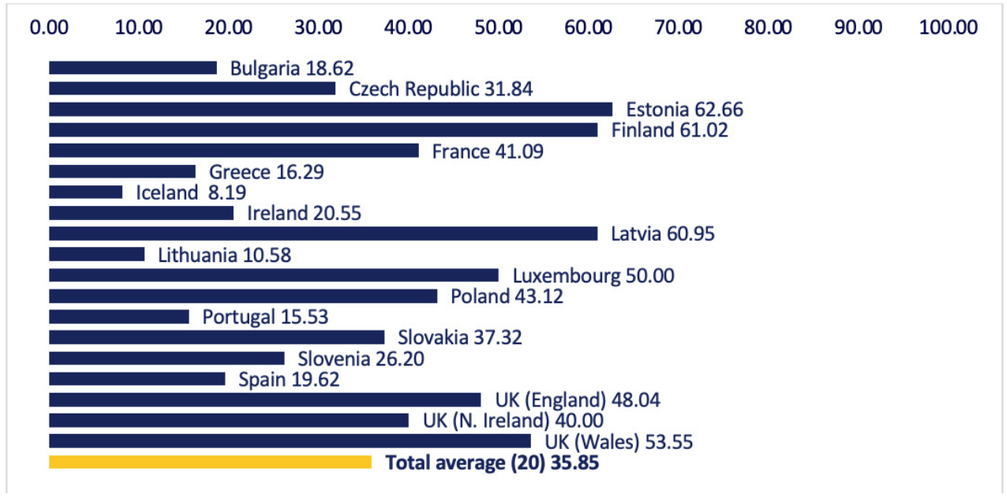
Europe, North America, and Oceania

Together, the regions of Oceania, North America, and Europe have come the furthest in terms of establishing disability-inclusive education policies. In Oceania, 50 percent of laws and 62 percent of education policy provisions advocate inclusion. In Europe and North America, while only 24 percent of education laws reference inclusion, 55 percent of education policies support inclusion in education.[40]

While none of the three regions mention segregation in their education policies, the data reveal a discrepancy between policy and reality.[41] According to the most recent empirical data from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, more than 35 percent of European students with special educational needs at the primary and lower-secondary levels (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] levels 1 and 2) are still being educated in segregated settings (Figure 5), while nearly 65 percent of European students with special educational needs are enrolled in inclusive education institutions (Figure 6).[42]

Figure 5

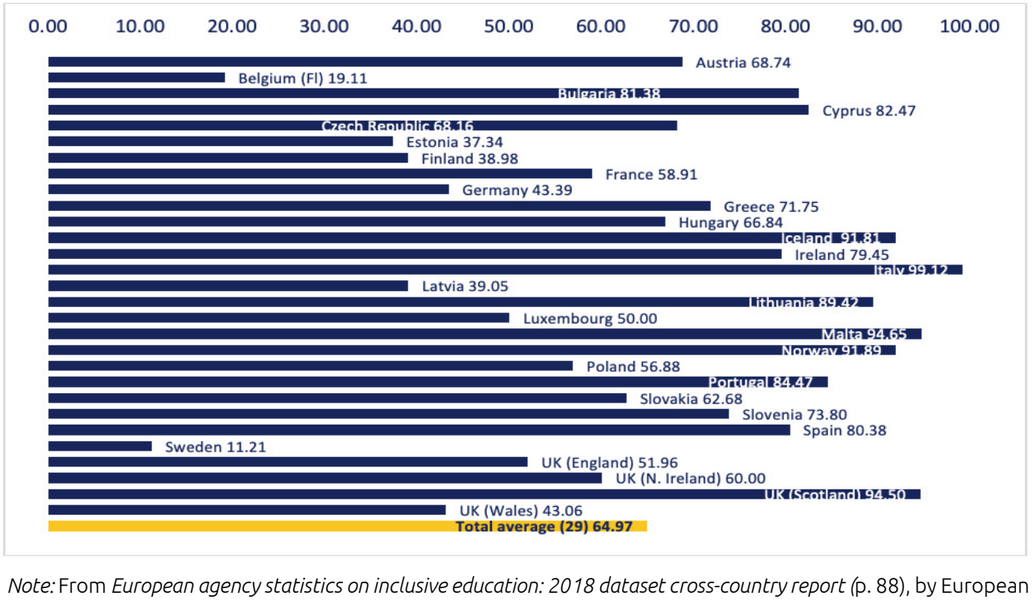
Percentage of European Learners at the Primary and Lower-Secondary Levels With an Official Decision of Special Educational Needs (SEN) Who Are Being Served in Segregated Educational Settings



Note: From *European agency statistics on inclusive education: 2018 dataset cross-country report* (p. 103), by European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (J. Ramberg, A. Lénárt & A. Watkins, Eds.), 2020, (https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/european-agency-statistics-inclusive-education-2018-dataset-cross-country). Copyright 2020 by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

Figure 6

Percentage of European Learners at the Primary and Lower-Secondary Levels With an Official Decision of SEN Who Are Being Served in Inclusive Education



Note: From *European agency statistics on inclusive education: 2018 dataset cross-country report* (p. 88), by European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (J. Ramberg, A. Lénárt & A. Watkins, Eds.), 2020, (https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/european-agency-statistics-inclusive-education-2018-dataset-cross-country). Copyright 2020 by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

Still, remarkable progress has been made toward inclusive education in the three regions, where many countries have been at the forefront of driving inclusive education practices. One prime example of a European country with a long-standing commitment to inclusive education in both law and policy is Portugal.

Portugal

Since 2009, Portugal has been repurposing its special schools into resource centers, moving most students designated with special educational needs into mainstream settings.[43] In 2018, Portugal passed Decree-Law 54/2018, a comprehensive piece of inclusive education legislation that recognizes the individual needs of each student and pushes to expand support for all children in inclusive education settings, including not only children with disabilities but also any and all other populations at risk of being excluded from educational opportunity.[44] The law outlines a tailored approach toward accommodating students of diverse needs in a singular education setting. Rather than determine the needed level of support through a medical diagnosis of disability, the law proposes students be given individual profiles that assess academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and environmental factors affecting their learning, with students receiving tiered levels of support based on their individual circumstances.[45] Furthermore, almost all educators in Portugal have shared that they frequently adapt their teaching to diversity within the classroom, indicating a high level of comfort with implementing inclusive education practices.[46]

Of course, progress toward inclusive education varies across Europe, in particular as countries in Central and Eastern Europe address and work to rectify the legacy of segregation and exclusion of people with disabilities left over from the socialist era. In this context, successes in establishing inclusive education and ensuring the rights of children with disabilities in policies and laws have developed as a result of collaboration between state and non-state actors and between local and global actors—as is the case in Armenia.

Armenia

Over the past 20 years, Bridge of Hope, an Armenian non-governmental organization (NGO), has been involved in advocating and implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities. In 2014, its advocacy efforts—which included media campaigns; consultations with teachers, students, and other disability-inclusive civil society groups; and discussions with the Ministry of Education—culminated in an amendment to the Law on General Education that established Armenia's system of education as inclusive.[47] Then, to ensure the implementation of the Law as amended, on 18 February 2016 the Armenian government approved Protocol Decision No. 6—"The Action Plan and timetable for implementation of the system of universal inclusive education."[48] Under this action plan, a proportion of special schools are to be restructured into "pedagogical-psychological support centers" to support mainstream schools in providing inclusive education services. By 2019, three of Armenia's 11 administrative regions had transitioned to an inclusive education system. In practice, however, the model persists as more integrated than truly inclusive.[49] By 2025, Armenia plans to fully transition into a universal inclusive education system, with the exception of 6 institutions (from the original group of 23) that will remain as special general education schools.[50]

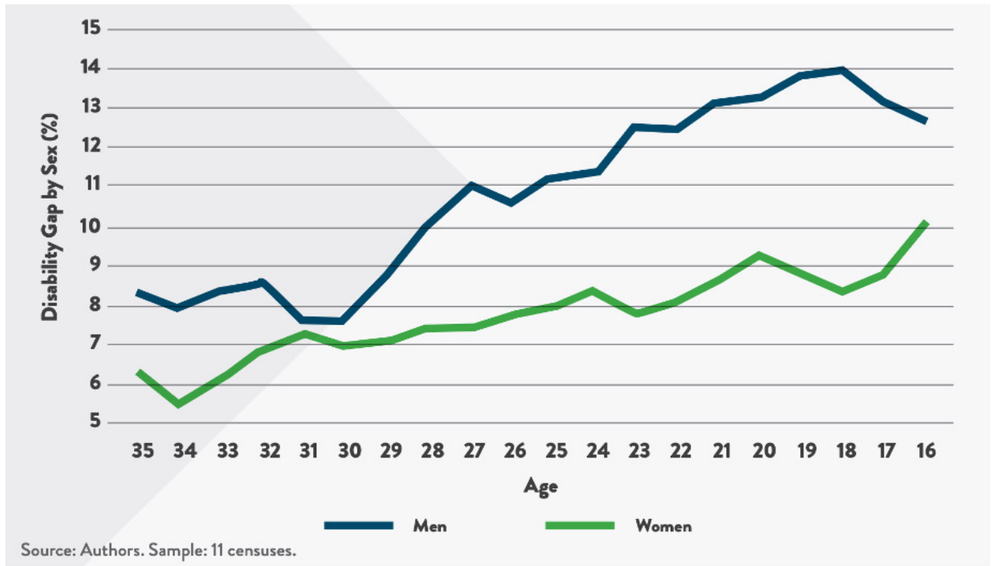
Throughout this process, Bridge of Hope has played an instrumental role in implementing the action plan by facilitating training on inclusive education and mainstream school support, as well as by taking over the pedagogical-psychological support services in the province of Tavush.[51] In addition to Bridge of Hope, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UNICEF Armenia, and World Vision Armenia all contribute to trainings and school support.[52] Furthermore, since 2016, USAID has funded in Armenia the Strengthening Inclusive Education System program, which is working to reconstruct and improve by 2023 the physical accessibility of at least 100 schools to better suit the needs of children with disabilities.[53]

Sub-Saharan Africa

While only 17 percent of the laws in sub-Saharan Africa codify inclusive education, a full 42 percent of the education policies promote inclusion. In 2018, the African Union adopted the milestone Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa. The Protocol calls for African states to provide inclusive and quality education and skills training for persons with disabilities.[54] However, the Protocol also notes that parties should "ensure appropriate schooling choices are available to persons with disabilities who may prefer to learn in particular environments," enabling the continuation of segregated schooling for students with disabilities.[55] As of August 2022, only 11 of 55 member states had signed on to the Protocol and only 3 member states—Kenya, Mali, and Rwanda—had ratified it.[56] Furthermore, a 2017 survey of 11 sub-Saharan African countries—Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, South Sudan, and Zambia—revealed that the gap in primary education completion rates between children with and without disabilities has increased over time as more children have had the opportunity to complete primary school. Specifically, the gap between boys with and without disabilities has grown from approximately 8.3 percentage points to 12.8 percentage points, and the gap between girls with and without disabilities has grown from approximately 6.3 percentage points to 10.1 percentage points (Figure 7).[57]

Figure 7

Disability Gap for Primary Completion in 11 Sub-Saharan African Countries (%)

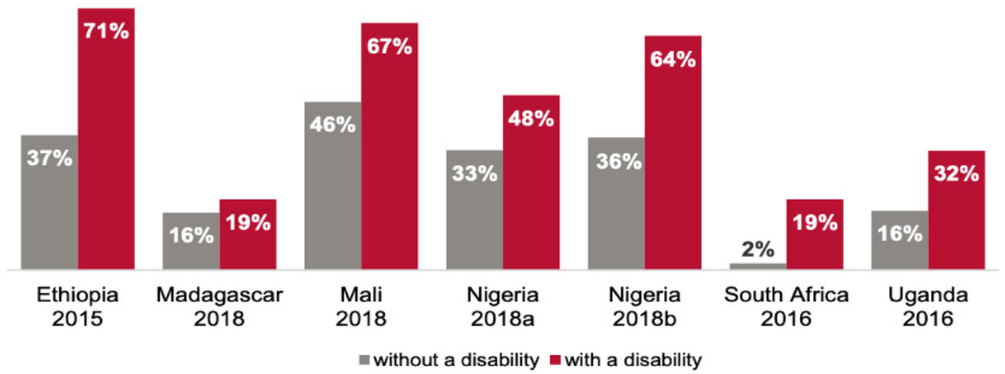


Note: From *The price of exclusion: Disability and education: The challenge of inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa* (p. 8), by Q. Wodon, C. Male, C. Montenegro & A. Nayihouba, 2018, The World Bank, (https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594444.pdf). Copyright 2018 by The World Bank.

This gap can also be seen by looking at out-of-school rates of primary and lower-secondary school-age children with and without disabilities. In countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Uganda, children with disabilities are around twice as likely to not be attending primary and lower-secondary school as are children without disabilities (Figure 8).[58] Even in South Africa, where enrollment rates tend to be high and the social support for inclusion strong, children with disabilities are almost 10 times more likely to be out of school than are their peers without disabilities.[59]

Figure 8

Out-of-School Rate for Primary and Lower-Secondary School-Age Children, by Disability Status (%)



Note: The authors use two different data sources for Nigeria: the country's Demographic and Health Survey and its Living Standards Measurement Study. From *Are we fulfilling our promise? Inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa: Data and evidence for education program (DEEP) project* (p. 15), by A. Mulcahy-Dunn, A. Martin, D. Mont, E. Venetis, S. Rotich & T. A. de Azevedo, 2020, United States Agency for International Development, (https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/DEEP_Inclusive%20Education%20Literature%20Review.pdf).

Malawi

Since 2007, Malawi has aimed to transform special schools into resource centers so that more students with disabilities can pursue integration into mainstream education settings.[60] Children with severe disabilities, however, are still generally provided education in segregated special settings. Most recently, Malawi has made additional progress toward establishing inclusive education more broadly, as embodied in its 2015-19 National Education Plan and its 2017-21 National Strategy on Inclusive Education. These policy frameworks have affirmed a broad understanding of inclusive education, not only for children with disabilities but also for other historically marginalized populations, such as girls, rural children, and children from poor households.[61]

South Africa

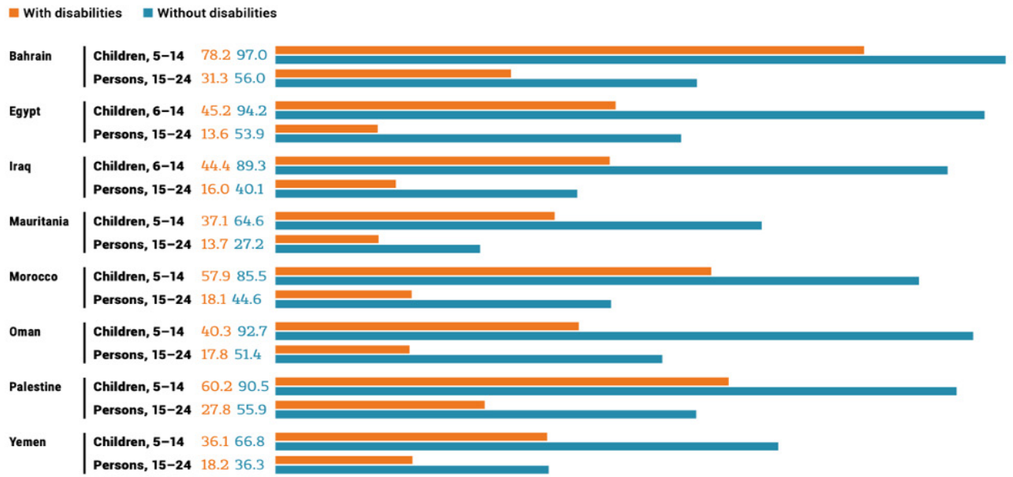
The context for inclusive education in South Africa is intrinsically linked to the push to establish equitable and democratic structures in post-apartheid South Africa since 1994. In pursuit of addressing the legacy of inequality, discrimination, and segregation from the apartheid era, in 2001 South Africa adopted "Education White Paper 6—Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System" (WP6).[62] WP6 radically conceptualized the education system in South Africa as an inclusive one that should respond to and accommodate the diverse needs of all learners—including those with disabilities—and aimed to establish an inclusive education system in South Africa over the course of 20 years.[63] Under this framework, the education system was envisioned as being divided into mainstream, full-service (or inclusive), and special schools, wherein mainstream schools would serve students with non-intensive support needs, full-service schools would accommodate students with a diverse range of moderate support needs, and special schools would serve students with a high level of support needs.[64] Practically, the framework intended to develop and restructure 500 of 20,000 mainstream schools to become full-service schools.[65] However, this ambitious policy framework has been challenging to implement in its ideal form due to resource constraints, lack of teacher training, and unclear implementation guidelines. While by 2015 South Africa had established 715 full-service schools[66]—more than its original goal—research has found that even full-service schools may resort to segregating students with disabilities within the school.[67] Still, there is evidence that the strong policy framework of WP6 has enabled at least some educators and schools to embrace inclusion as the norm.[68]

Middle East and North Africa

In the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, only 9 percent of the laws advocate inclusive education, while 27 percent of the education policies promote inclusion. These figures are associated with a significant gap in attendance between children with and without disabilities; across Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, and Yemen, children and persons with disabilities are about half as likely to attend schools as are their peers without disabilities (Figure 9).[69] In addition, the dropout rate dramatically increases after age 14, highlighting the challenges for persons with disabilities of obtaining secondary and higher education. In Egypt, in particular, while children with disabilities between the ages of 5 and 14 are two times more likely to be out of school than are their peers without disabilities, teens and young adults with disabilities—those between the ages of 15 and 24—are four times more likely than their peers to be out of school.[70]

Figure 9

School Attendance Across Eight MENA Countries (%)



Note: From *Disability in the Arab region, 2018* (p. 38), by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2018, United Nations, (https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/disability-arab-region-2018-english_1.pdf). Copyright 2018 by United Nations.

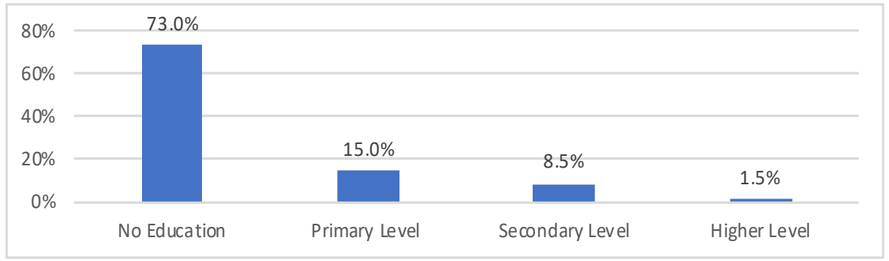
In the MENA region, while technical and accessible services are increasingly being offered to students with disabilities, private associations and nonprofit organizations are the entities assuming primary responsibility for implementing these interventions, rather than governmental entities.[71] Such is the case in Morocco, where Humanity & Inclusion (HI), UNICEF, and USAID have served as strategic partners in implementing inclusive education projects.

Morocco

Morocco's education system approach has historically been characterized by segregation, wherein children with disabilities—if and when they had the opportunity to attend school—were educated in special education institutions, often with oversimplified curricula.[72] In 2014, Morocco's Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MNEVT) partnered with UNICEF and HI to pilot an inclusive education project in 18 schools in the Souss-Massa-Drâa region, resulting in the enrollment rates for children with disabilities increasing to over 31 percent.[73] While this figure still represents a relatively small proportion of children with disabilities, the impact is notable; by comparison, in that same year across all of Morocco, only 15 percent of children with disabilities had reached the primary school level—and 73 percent of people with disabilities had never obtained any schooling (Figure 10).[74]

Figure 10

Level of Educational Attainment of Persons With Disabilities in Morocco, 2014



Note: Data sourced from *Moroccan experience of disability statistics* [PowerPoint slides], by Z. E. O. Touhami, 2015, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/washington_group/meeting15/wg15_session_8_4_touhami.pdf).

The next year, Morocco presented its 2015–2030 national education sector vision, which included a section titled, "Guaranteeing the right to education for persons with disabilities or special needs."[75] While this document purports to ensure the right to education for children with disabilities, the vision's implementation approach focuses on integration, with inclusion reserved only for those students with a medically-determined diagnosis of a "mild to moderate degree" of disability.[76] In this context, "integrated classes" refer to segregated classes for children with disabilities within a general education school. After three years in such a classroom, a child with disabilities may qualify to transition into a general education classroom but, regardless of age, must begin at first grade.[77] Those who do not qualify to transition are in danger of being placed in fully segregated schools run by associations or, in the more likely scenario, leaving school altogether, given the few spots available in the small number of segregated special schools.[78]

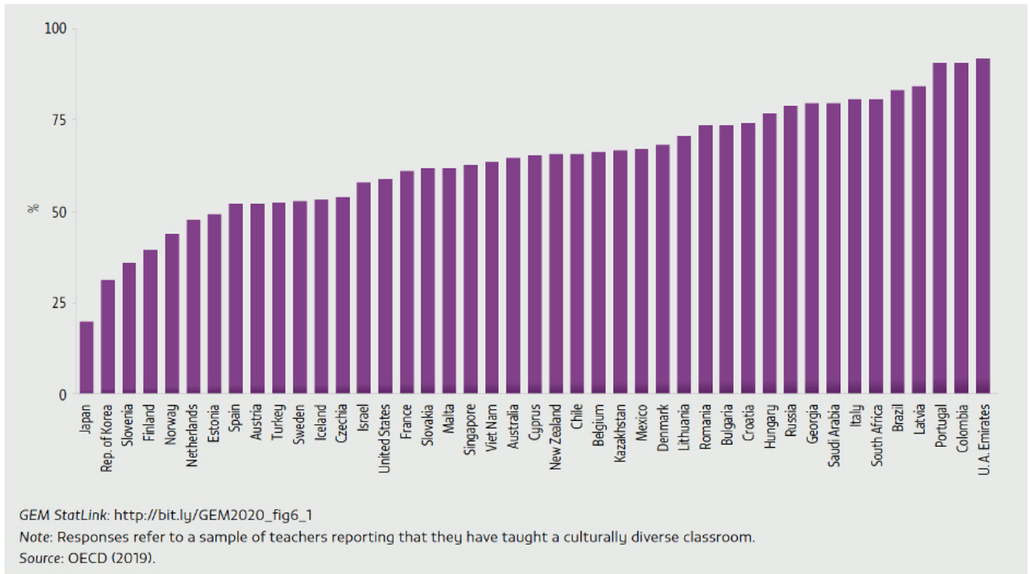
In the face of these challenges, organizations such as UNICEF are working on the ground to ensure progress in bringing more children with disabilities into Morocco's mainstream school system. In 2019, in collaboration with UNICEF, the MNEVT conducted a national evaluation of the education for children with disabilities and developed a decentralized plan to bring inclusive education to 700 targeted schools between 2019 and 2021.[79] Additionally, UNICEF has played an integral role in training teachers on the inclusive education model in primary schools and has provided direct support for local initiatives promoting inclusion in 4 of the country's 12 regions.[80] Following these efforts, the number of children with disabilities attending primary schools more than doubled between 2019 and 2020, from 10,200 to 22,240 students.[81]

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Since 2006, when the UAE signed the CRPD, the UAE has worked to institutionalize inclusion as a guiding principle of its national education policies, strategies, and programs. Legally, through Federal Act No. 29 of 2006, the UAE government has asserted that people with intellectual disabilities (ID)—whom the UAE refers to as People of Determination—deserve access to quality education alongside students without ID.[82] Moreover, the UAE has coupled its policies with significant political and financial commitments toward supporting efforts to realize inclusion in education—most recently through its support of Special Olympics' work promoting inclusive education globally. In 2017, Dubai released the Dubai Inclusive Education Policy Framework, which advocates adjustments in curriculum to accommodate diverse backgrounds and needs of all students and specifically to ensure the participation of students with disabilities.[83] Not surprisingly, in a UNESCO survey of 43 middle- and high-income countries, the UAE had the highest proportion of teachers—almost all—who indicated they frequently adapted their teaching to accommodate the diverse needs of their students (Figure 11).[84]

Figure 11

Percentage of Teachers Who Report Adapting Their Teaching to the Cultural Diversity of Students "Quite a Bit" or "A Lot," in Selected Middle- and High-Income Countries, 2018



Note: From *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all* (p. 140), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020, (http://bit.ly/2020gemreport). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

In March 2019, Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, served as the host city for more than 7,000 Special Olympics athletes from 200 nations for the first World Games to be held in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) Region and the largest World Games in Special Olympics' history. To reach new countries and athletes who had no previous involvement in Special Olympics, the UAE mobilized resources to help countries such as Ethiopia, Congo, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Niger establish Special Olympics programs and achieve the accreditation necessary to field teams to attend World Games. Furthermore, the UAE committed to become the first country in the world to bring the Unified Champion Schools® model—the Special Olympics inclusive schooling model—to 100 percent of its public schools.

Arab Republic of Egypt

Egypt's commitment to inclusion in education dates back to 1962 with its ratification of the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education. Since that time, the government has passed a series of policies and laws that propelled Egypt on a path toward inclusive education. Articles 3 and 15 of Law 139 of 1981 (known as the Education Law) mandated access to basic education and pre-university education as a right for all, stating that such education is to be made free in the state's public schools.[85] Article 19 of Egypt's 2014 Constitution aligned this mandate with global standards by promoting the values of tolerance and non-discrimination and affirming that every citizen has the right to education "…in accordance with global quality criteria."[86] Article 81 of the Constitution explicitly extended the guarantee of educational rights to those with disabilities, declaring, "The state shall guarantee the education rights of people with disabilities. The state guarantees their right to exercise their integration with other citizens in order to achieve the principles of equality, justice and equal opportunities."[87] Article 93 of the Constitution bound national policies to global agreements, affirming that, "The State shall be bound by the international human rights agreements, covenants and conventions ratified by Egypt."[88]

Two more recent decisions solidified the Republic's commitment to inclusive education: the 2018 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2014–2030 Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education. The 2018 law elevated Egypt into a global leadership position by stating that public and private education institutions must apply the rule of equality between children with disabilities and other children (Art. 11).[89] The Ministry of Education also committed to offering special needs education based on the nature and level of disability (Art. 10).[90] The current Education Strategic Plan aims to achieve full integration of children with simple/basic disabilities as well as to improve service in currently available special education schools.[91] The plan also states that "providing special needs people with the opportunity for effective enrollment in and completion of education system is considered an essential dimension" to equality in educational access.[92]

Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Egypt

The population of children with disabilities in Egypt is significant. The United Nations estimates that there are 12 million people with disabilities in Egypt.[93] Because the impact extends to families, there are about 36 million persons who are affected by disability in Egypt.[94] According to a study carried out by the World Health Organization, 45 percent of disabled people in Egypt are under 18.[95] The proportion of those with disabilities who have ever attended school is only 43 percent—approximately half the rate of those without a disability.[96] The statistics regarding their school attendance and literacy rates underscore the tremendous need. Illiteracy rates for children with disabilities are quite high: in Egypt, 61 percent of boys with disabilities and 70 percent of girls with disabilities do not know how to read.[97]

Central and South Asia

In Central and South Asia, no countries have legal provisions for inclusive education in their education laws; to the contrary, 42 percent of these countries have legal provisions for segregation. Still, around 27 percent of the countries' education policies advocate inclusion. In South Asia specifically, many education sector plans ensure the right of children with disabilities to education; however, they primarily promote segregation in special settings or integration in existing class structures, conditioned on level of disability.[98]

India

In India, fewer than three percent of all children of primary and lower-secondary school age (6–13 years) do not attend school.[99] The almost universal education attainment rate has come about as a result of the implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme in 2000. This scheme operationalized the goal to achieve Universalization of Elementary Education[100]—or free and compulsory education for children ages 6–14 years—as dictated by the Constitution.[101] It also gave special focus to "children with special needs" through the inclusion of provisions for the training of teachers and parents in practices of inclusive education, the identification of children who may need supports and services, awareness raising, and the design of accessible buildings.[102]

While India ratified the CRPD in 2007, it was not until 2016 when India promulgated the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) that the education provisions of the CRPD were assimilated into the Indian legal system.[103] Among other things, the RPWD worked to address the educational enrollment gap between children with and without disabilities by delineating specific measures intended to promote and facilitate inclusive education.[104] Most recently the National Education Policy of India, introduced in 2020, has outlined a comprehensive framework for an equitable education system in India and enshrined the rights of children with disabilities within the school system.

While such policy frameworks have aimed to promote inclusion and integrate students with disabilities into "mainstream" schools alongside students without disabilities,[105] schools have been found to encourage home-based education for students with disabilities regardless of the child's needs and extent of disability, contradicting the intent of inclusion.[106] Throughout India, students with disabilities who are enrolled in mainstream schools often learn in separate special classrooms, are told by school educators to show up only when a resource teacher is available, have difficulty obtaining admission in private schools, and must navigate inaccessible physical infrastructure to attend school.[107] As a result, 28 percent—or over half a million—of children with disabilities ages 6–13 years have remained out of school, and 39 percent of all school-aged children with disabilities ages 5–19 years are excluded from education in India.[108]

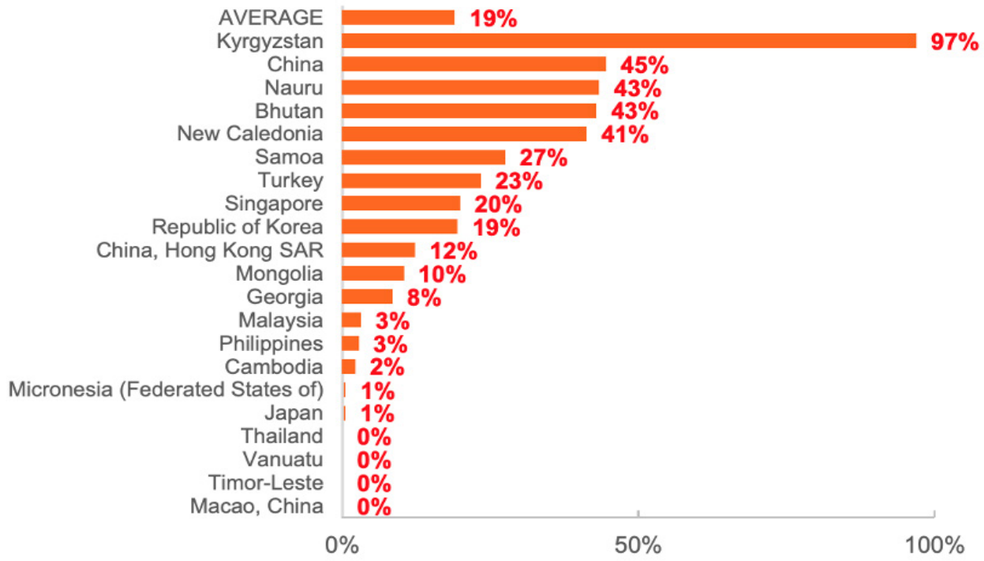
In other countries in the region, children with disabilities who desire to go to school are still segregated into residential institutions. Such is the case in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan

Across 21 countries and territories in the Asia and Pacific regions, an average of 19 percent of children with disabilities are educated in special primary schools.[109] Among these jurisdictions, Kyrgyzstan has been an obvious outlier with the highest proportion of children with disabilities—97 percent—attending special institutions (Figure 12).[110] In 2012, the Kyrgyz government stated its commitment to deinstitutionalize, starting with efforts to close 17 of 140 residential institutions for children, including 3 of 16 federally controlled residential special schools for children with disabilities.[111] Yet by 2020, the government had closed only one such residential special school, and 3,000 children with disabilities remain in institutions.[112] Children with disabilities must be evaluated by two entities—the Psycho-Medical Pedagogical Consultation and the Medical-Social Commission of Experts—to be considered for educational opportunity, and their decision surrounding a child's fitness for education is often undisputed by the education system.[113] Still, Kyrgyzstan is making efforts toward advancing an inclusive education system. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan signed onto the CRPD, taking a step toward protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.[114] That same year, with support from UNICEF and USAID, Kyrgyzstan released a concept note outlining the country's strategic framework for the development of inclusive education.[115]

Figure 12

Percentage of Children With Disabilities Attending Primary School in a Special School, in 21 Countries, Around 2015



Note: From *Disability and development report: Realizing the sustainable development goals by, for and with persons with disabilities, 2018* (p. 85), by United Nations, 2019, (https://social.un.org/publications/UN-Flagship-Report-Disability-Final.pdf). Copyright 2019 by United Nations.

Latin America and the Caribbean

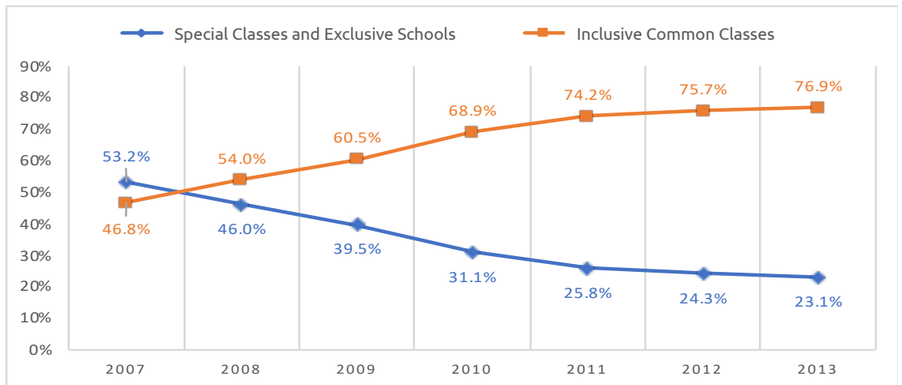
In Latin America and the Caribbean, 16 percent of countries have laws promoting inclusion in education, while 42 percent still have laws promoting segregation. In terms of education policy, only 23 percent of countries have policy provisions for inclusive education.

Brazil

In Brazil, segregation within the education system has historically been the norm.[116] In 2008, however, Brazil introduced the National Policy on Special Education from the perspective of inclusive education, directing state and municipal education systems to apply funding and resources to increase the participation, inclusion, and success of children with disabilities in mainstream "common" classrooms.[117] After this policy change, the share of students with disabilities in inclusive common schools increased, from 47 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2013 (Figure 13).[118] In 2015, the Statute of People with Disabilities—otherwise known as the Brazilian Law of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities—aligned Brazil's domestic laws with the CRPD, which had been ratified in 2008. By 2021, more than 1.3 million children with disabilities were enrolled in school—either in common classes or in exclusive special classes—and more than 90 percent of these students with disabilities were enrolled in inclusive classes.[119] However, in 2020 a new National Plan for Special Education was introduced. It encourages a segregated education system for children with disabilities and facilitates the transfer of government funding to such special institutions.[120] This policy framework conflicts with Brazil's legal provisions for inclusive education; it remains to be seen to what extent it is implemented and what impact it has on the experiences of children with disabilities.

Figure 13

Evolution of the Percentage of Children With Disabilities Enrolled in Basic Education by School Setting in Brazil, 2007–2013



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Chile

Chile has a mixed public-private education system, wherein the majority of students attend private schools that receive educational vouchers for each student.[121] In 1998, Decree 490 promoted the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. In 2009, Chile issued Decree No. 170 delineating the criteria for students with special educational needs (SEN) to receive school vouchers to be used either at special education institutions or within mainstream schools that have a School Integration Programme.[122] Regardless of the option chosen, the government provides financial support to the school to provide the services or supports needed in each student's case.

In 2015, the Inclusive Education Act No. 20.845 established that Chile's education system should be inclusive of students from different backgrounds—including diverse socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, gender, or religious backgrounds.[123] While the comprehensive education policies and laws in Chile have encouraged school enrollment and integration for children with disabilities, the voucher system has increased the number of subsidies to special education schools, serving to further entrench a segregated approach to education rather than an inclusive one.[124] In 2018, Chile had 2,027 special education institutions and 5,662 schools with School Integration Programmes. Over 75 percent of students attending either type of institution had a language disorder and a little over 20 percent of students had intellectual disabilities.[125]

East Asia and Southeast Asia

Of the six regions discussed in this brief, East Asia and Southeast Asia has the most progress to make in establishing inclusive education systems. Only 6 percent of countries in this region have laws that promote inclusive education, while 44 percent of countries have laws that advocate segregation. Also concerning is that only 15 percent of education policy provisions recommend inclusive education practices.

Thailand

In 2008, Thailand passed the Education Provision for People with Disabilities Act, which stipulated that inclusive education for people with disabilities should be provided as one educational approach within the Thai education system.[126] While the law does not give priority to inclusive education over segregation, it does stipulate that people with disabilities have the right to choose the institutional setting that they determine most appropriate.[127] In 2009, however, 272,506 students with disabilities still attended special institutions while only 3,623 were reported as attending mainstream schools.[128] The challenge of turning policy into practice has been attributed to the fragmentation of government ministries that are responsible for the welfare of people with disabilities, as well as the low capacity of teachers and schools to educate students with disabilities.[129] Even so, Thailand is pursuing inclusive education as policy: the 2017–2036 National Education Plan

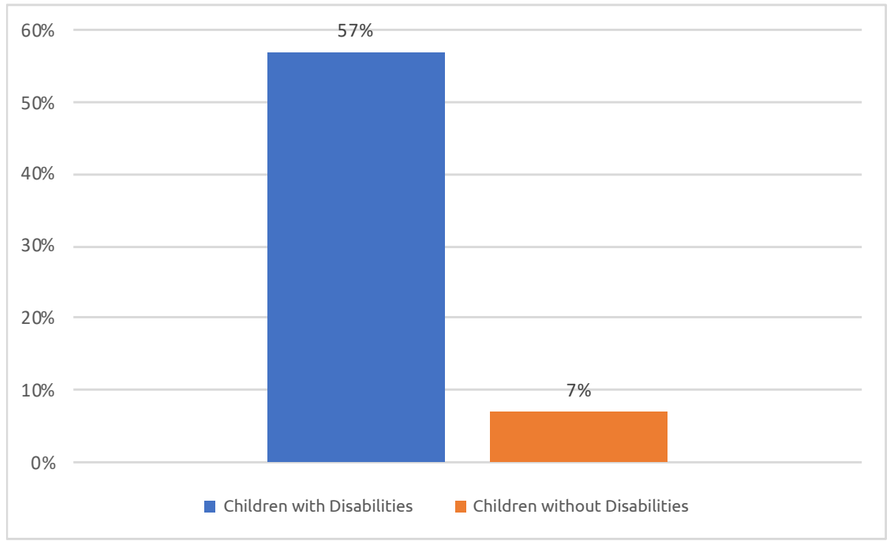
delineates inclusive education as a policy goal to meet the educational needs of diverse learners, including those with disabilities and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.[130]

Cambodia

Cambodia began establishing a legislative framework for inclusion with the promulgation of the Education Law of 2007. This law explicitly affirms the right of children with disabilities to education, but only if there is sufficient support within the school such that the student can "fulfill the educational program of the educational institutions," thereby establishing that children with disabilities must adapt to their schools rather than vice versa.[131] In 2008, Cambodia released its Policy on Education for Children with Disabilities, which provides more concrete guarantees of educational service provision for children with disabilities through primary school.[132] Nevertheless, in 2014 the Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey found there was still a difference of 50 percentage points between the out-of-school rates of children with and without disabilities (Figure 14).

Figure 14

Out-of-School Rates of Children of Primary School Age in Cambodia, by Disability Status (%)



Note: Adapted from *Education and disability* [Fact Sheet No. 40] (p. 5), by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017, (http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs40-education-and-disability-2017-en.pdf). CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO.

In light of these data, as well as in response to international trends toward inclusive education, Cambodia has recently made a more concerted effort to build out a comprehensive inclusive education system. In 2017, Cambodia established the National Institute of Special Education, creating a centralized institution to build teachers' capacity to facilitate segregated and inclusive education for students with disabilities.[133] Furthermore, in 2018 Cambodia adopted the Policy on Inclusive Education, which encompasses policy toward inclusive education from kindergarten to the start of higher education.[134]

Implementation of inclusive education policy in Cambodia is primarily undertaken and supported by non-state actors, including the Global Partnership for Education, Save the Children, USAID, UNICEF, and All Children Reading.[135] While the support of these actors has been instrumental in operating special segregated and integrated classrooms as well as in developing guidelines for training, it has also created fragmentation in certain inclusive education practices. As of 2018, Cambodia still lacked a national standardized system for identifying children with disabilities; such identification is typically undertaken by NGOs using their internal screening tools.[136]

Conclusion

This brief seeks to expand educators' and policymakers' understanding of how the vision of international inclusive education is falling short of including all learners, no matter their identity, background, or ability. The brief's scope primarily focuses on outlining the progress in establishing inclusive education laws and policies worldwide. While these measures do provide an indication of progress in instituting inclusive education systems, they are not the only nor necessarily the most revealing indicators of progress made, as they do not show the extent to which laws and policies are accepted by the population or put into practice. Future analyses should take into account other indicators of inclusion, such as financing—which is a more accurate indicator of political commitment than policy frameworks. Another key indicator that should be examined is attitudes at the community level—which have a significant impact on the day-to-day experience of children with disabilities and which, when negative or discriminatory, serve as one of the most consequential barriers to inclusion of children with disabilities today.[137]

This review of the extant literature also demonstrates that successful efforts to implement inclusive educational practices involve both governments and non-state actors. Only with multi-sectoral collaboration can inclusive education be instituted and sustainably maintained over the long term. While the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action was published almost 30 years ago, many countries are just now putting in place comprehensive policy and action plans to achieve what the Salamanca Statement outlined, meaning that consequential change in the day-to-day lived experiences of many children with disabilities is yet to be attained—and cannot be taken for granted.

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Special Olympics Youth Leader participates in the 2019 Special Olympics Global Youth Leadership Summit in Abu Dhabi

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