# Inclusive Education in Africa's Regular Primary Schools

*From the African Community of Practice on Management for Development Results at the African Capacity Building Foundation*

Case Study
N° 79

## SYNOPSIS

Inclusive education – when children with and without disabilities learn together in the same class – is important for socioeconomic development. The objective of this case study is to explain what it is all about, to distinguish it from special education, and to highlight the challenges in implementing it. The study also highlights the benefits of putting children with some form of handicap in schools for the non-handicapped and explains how to deal with a mixture of handicapped and non-handicapped children.

**Key findings**. Inadequate resources, too few teachers, and negative attitudes and perceptions laden with cultural beliefs are the general challenges affecting inclusive education. Inclusive education occurs when there is ongoing advocacy, planning, support, and commitment.

**Key lessons**. Inclusion has increased the number of children accessing education, the literacy rate at community level, and positive perceptions toward disability, and has enabled learners to appreciate each other's strength and weaknesses.

**Key recommendations**. For inclusive education to succeed, the focus of educational leaders should be on: creating an inclusive learning environment; building facilities and infrastructure with positive impacts on teaching and learning for pupils and teachers; establishing goals for the curriculum; developing relevant content; ensuring effective pedagogy; considering the language of instruction; and developing a sound assessment policy. It is also important to supply and distribute learning materials and provide a secure physical environment with enough facilities.

## Introduction

Inclusive education is an important aspect of a country's socioeconomic development. It occurs when children with and without disabilities learn together in the same class. Most educators and parents who have been exposed to its challenges know that positive academic and social outcomes occur for all the children involved. For a long period, children with disabilities were educated in separate classes or schools. Yet simply placing children with and without disabilities together does not produce positive outcomes. Inclusive education occurs when there is ongoing advocacy, planning, support, and commitment.

Inclusion in education is the practice in which students with special educational needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. UNESCO (2000) developed a language of inclusion for the disabled into the system of education by stating that inclusive education starts from the belief that the right to education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society; that inclusive education takes Education for All forward by finding ways of enabling schools to serve all children in their communities; and that inclusive education is about all learners, with a focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities, such as learners with special needs and

disabilities, and children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.

Inclusion is thus about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child and to reject the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities from those without them. A premium is placed on full participation by students with disabilities and on respect for their social, civil, and educational rights. Inclusive schools no longer distinguish between "general education" and "special education" programs; instead, the school is restructured so that all students learn together (Grenot-Scheyer et al. 1996).

All students can learn and benefit from education and schools should adapt to the needs of students, rather than vice versa. Individual differences between students are a source of richness and diversity, and not a problem. The diversity of needs and pace of development of students are addressed through a wide and flexible range of responses (so long as those responses do not include removing a student with a disability from a general education classroom). Inclusive education is a process of removing barriers and enabling all students, including previously excluded groups, to learn and participate within general school systems.

## Objectives of the case study

The objectives are to explain what inclusive education is all about and to distinguish it from special education. It takes Kenya as an example of a country that has researched and partially documented the difficulties encountered and its approach to integrating inclusive education in the standard practice of schools.

The paper also explains some of the myths among school teachers and many communities on those with disabilities and then explains what is necessary to learn and practice. Finally, it deals with challenges facing inclusive education.

## The principles guiding high-quality inclusive education

*All children belong.* Inclusive education is based on the simple idea that every child and family is valued equally and deserves the same opportunities and experiences. Inclusive education is about children with disabilities—whether the disability is mild or severe, hidden or obvious—participating in everyday activities, just as they would if their disability were not present.

*All children learn in different ways.* Inclusion is about providing the help that children need to learn and participate. Sometimes, help from friends or teachers works best. Other times, specially designed materials or technology can help.

*It is every child's right to be included.* Inclusive education is a child's right, not a privilege. The Persons with Disabilities Act, 2003 in Kenya, states that all children with disabilities should be educated with non-disabled children of their own age and have access to the general education curriculum.

## The benefits of inclusive education

*Families' visions of a typical life for their children can come true.* All parents want their children to be accepted by their peers, have friends, and lead "regular" lives. Inclusive settings can make this vision a reality for many children with disabilities.

*Children develop a positive understanding of themselves and others.* When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. Respect and understanding grow when children of differing abilities and cultures play and learn together.

*Friendships develop.* Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without disabilities learn with and from each other in inclusive classes.

*Children learn important academic skills*. In inclusive classrooms, children with and without disabilities are expected to learn to read, write, and do math. With

higher expectations and good instruction, children with disabilities can learn academic skills.

*All children learn by being together*. The philosophy of inclusive education aims at helping all children learn so everyone in the class benefits. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment.

## Common misconceptions about inclusive education

Some opinions about inclusive education are based on unsound information.

### Myth 1: Separate is better

*Reality: Segregation doesn't work.* Whether children are separated based on race, ability, or any other criteria, a separate education is not an equal education. Research shows that children with and without disabilities learn as much or more in inclusive classes (Vaughn et al. 1998).

### Myth 2: Children must be "ready" to be included

*Reality: All children have the right to be with other children of their own age.* A child with disabilities does not have to perform at a certain grade level or act exactly like the other children in their class to benefit from being a full-time member in general education.

### Myth 3: Parents don't support inclusive education

*Reality: Parents have been and continue to be the driving force for inclusive education.* The best outcomes occur when parents of children with disabilities and professionals work together. Effective partnerships happen when there is collaboration, communication and, most of all trust between parents and professionals.

## Challenges of inclusive education in developing countries

While inclusive education has its benefits, there are enormous challenges hindering its effective implementation, especially in developing countries.

### Inadequate educational facilities

Most schools in developing countries have inadequate facilities. These range from lack of reading materials to desks and even classrooms. Inclusive education has led to an increased number of students. According to a study conducted by Oakes and Saunders (2002), shortages of teaching and learning materials have a negative impact on learners, especially disabled ones with less knowledge about a subject.

### Poor teacher training

Teacher training is important in teaching and learning. Lack of capacity of teachers in handling both the disabled and non-disabled learners in one class. This affects the understanding of some learners and is reflected in their performance. Continued poor performance among disabled learners due to poor teaching skills triggers their poor enrollment in regular schools. Angrist and Lavy (2001) observe that lack of adequate and proper training received by teachers leads to a reduction in their pupils' test scores, undermining the success of inclusive education.

### Poor policy implementation

There is no adequate support for inclusive education from stakeholders. In most developing countries, most parents of disabled learners are cautious about placing their children in an inclusion program because of fears that the children will be ridiculed by other children, or be unable to develop regular life skills in an academic classroom. This is mainly attributed to poor policy implementation.

Many governments in developing countries have not been able to implement an inclusive education policy framework. In some countries like Kenya, the education policy is an exclusively one-sided policy and fails to meet the needs of the challenged learners in inclusive education arrangements. The country's controversial national exam, for example, fails to capture learners' diverse backgrounds and needs (Sugiharto 2008).

## The Kenyan experience

The Kenyan "Persons with Disabilities Act 2003" states the need to promote inclusive education in the country with a focus on marginalized groups, especially children with special needs and those with disabilities. However, the extent to which this is implemented is debated. A study was commissioned on inclusion in some parts of the country and found that teachers and community members, for different reasons, still have negative attitudes toward inclusion.

Teachers' negative attitudes are based on inadequate resources; for communities, it stems from cultural beliefs. However, inclusion has increased the number of children accessing education, improved the literacy rate at community level, created positive perceptions toward disability in the community, and enabled learners to appreciate each other's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, inadequate resources, inadequate teachers, and negative attitudes and perceptions laden with cultural beliefs were the general challenges affecting effective implementation of inclusive education.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Inclusive education in most developing countries remains in the realm of theory; it is still grappling with problems of policy implementation and an environment that is not conducive to sound implementation. The success of inclusive education is also hindered by other factors like communities' attitudes to disability, and lack of involvement of stakeholders. Much more needs to be done to ensure that inclusive education is a success.

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training with other education stakeholders, policymakers, and political parties address the following areas:

- Ensure greater school autonomy and better leadership.

- Create an inclusive learning environment, as well as facilities and infrastructure that have a positive impact on teaching and learning for pupils and teachers.

- Establish appropriate goals for the curriculum, developing relevant content, using learning time well, ensuring effective pedagogy, and considering the language of instruction while developing a sound assessment policy. It is also important to supply and distribute learning materials and to ensure a secure physical environment.

- Create positive teacher attitudes through in-service training and provision of seminars and workshops that will put more emphasis on teachers' work in teams.

- Find solutions through joint problem solving and provide teaching and learning materials. Reduce the workload by training many teachers on special needs education.

## References

Angrist, J. D., and V. Lavy. 2001. "Does Teacher Training Affect Pupil Learning? Evidence from Comparisons in Jerusalem Public Schools." Journal of Labor Economics 19 (2): 343–69.

Oakes, J., and M. Saunders. 2002. Access to Textbooks, Instructional Materials, Equipment, and Technology: Inadequacy and Inequality in California's Public Schools. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

Grenot-Scheyer, M., K. Jubala, K. Bishop, and J. Coots. 1996. The inclusive classroom. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Materials, Inc.

Sugiharto, S. 2008. "Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education." Jakarta Post, June 7. http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/06/07/challenges-implementing-inclusive-education.html.

UNECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa). 2013. Regional Integration: Agricultural Value Chains to Integrate and Transform

Agriculture in West Africa. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Vaughn, S., Elbaum, B. E., Schumm, J. S., & Hughes, M. T. (1998). Social outcomes for students with and without learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *31*(5), 428-436.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2000. "Education for All:

Meeting our Collective Commitments." Dakar Framework for Action. Text adopted at the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, April 26–28.

World Economic Forum. 2009. The Africa Competitiveness Report 2009. Joint publication with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, and the African Development Bank. Geneva.

## Acknowledgments