

TOWARDS A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Policy brief

Insights from

The Evaluation of Norway's inclusion of persons with disabilities in development cooperation (2022)

Written by NIRAS Sweden, commissioned by the Department for Evaluation in Norad

KEY MESSAGES

- Decisions about pedagogic methods and the educational environment for children with disabilities should first and foremost reflect what is best for the individual child considering his or her disability and the context where they live.
- Approaches that lead to inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools and classrooms remain the most appropriate long-term goal, and it is important that policies reflect this.
- Nonetheless, prevailing resource and capacity deficits have meant that, in the short- to medium-term, inclusive approaches may not always be in the best interests of the child, particularly for children who are deaf (requiring a sign language environment), children with autism or other psychosocial disabilities (requiring small or individual learning environments), or children with intellectual or multiple disabilities that require

specialised teacher skills that are beyond what local schools can provide.

- This suggests a dilemma, as it is important to maintain pressure for policy commitments and resource allocations to move towards more inclusive systems, while also being ready to find optimal solutions for meeting children's needs and the demand of children and their parents for specialised support.
- For this reason, a pluralistic lens needs to be applied, i.e., a readiness to acknowledge that there are going to be multiple paths towards improving the quality of education, while maintaining firm commitments to move towards increasingly inclusive systems.
- This implies that the hybrid systems that are emerging in Nepal, Malawi and indeed many countries in the Global North should be recognised as relevant for prevailing needs. These hybrid



systems are not in contradiction with policy commitments, which provide opportunities for pluralism, i.e., acceptance of these multiple paths. They reflect commitments to ensuring that every child has a right to education that is appropriate to his/her needs.

“Disability inclusion is defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as “the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all their diversity, the promotion and mainstreaming of their rights into the work of the Organization, the development of disability-specific programmes and the consideration of disability-related perspectives...”. With regard to education, disability inclusion is further informed by Article 24 of the CRPD and the CRPD Committee’s General Comment 4, which both entrench State parties’ obligation to ensure that education systems at all levels are inclusive of people with disabilities and provide a framework for the design and delivery of inclusive education. Inclusive education is a progressive right that should be implemented gradually according to contexts.”

Policy commitments promoting education systems that are inclusive for children with disabilities are becoming increasingly well established. This represents a decisive shift away from the past emphasis on special schools and special needs education. At the global level these policies take as their point of departure the General Comment Four on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal Four which confirms the right to education for all children, including those with disabilities. This is also reflected in Norwegian commitments to a range of international charters and in its financial support to UNICEF inclusive education efforts, the World Bank Inclusive Education Multi-Donor Fund, the Global Action on Disability Network and the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with disabilities.

Some countries, such as Malawi, are becoming more explicit about inclusive education as their overall goal. In others, such as Nepal, there is more ambivalence. Despite a growing recognition of the appropriateness of inclusive education, plans still include significant

investments in special schools. Furthermore, within the global and national disability communities there are differing views, with organisations representing the deaf being particularly forceful in demanding special schools where sign language is the first means of instruction.

Putting inclusive education policies into practice is thus proving problematic. It would be an exaggeration to claim that inclusive education has displaced special needs education as the dominant paradigm in actual practice in most countries. Inclusion requires an in-depth transformation of the general education systems, as well as changes in norms and attitudes. It also requires major financial investments to build human resource capacities, expand access to material support and improve schools. Such transformations are not likely to be rapid nor linear.

There are good reasons for caution in undertaking a rapid policy shift. Evidence from Malawi and Nepal suggests that the roll out of inclusive education policies should reflect learning that considers what is in the best interest for children with different disabilities given local conditions. Norwegian supported programmes have provided important fora for this adaptive learning. Limitations in human and material resources have led school authorities, organisations of persons with disabilities and communities to put into place hybrid approaches that combine efforts to make mainstream classes more accessible and welcoming for an increasing number of children with disabilities, while also retaining special needs facilities where these remain more appropriate. This may, for example, mean small groups for children with certain psychosocial disabilities, separate units for deaf students where sign language teaching capacities are not in place in the mainstream education system, and resource units or special schools that respond to other needs that cannot yet be met in regular classes. Children with multiple and profound disabilities may require home schooling. The design of these hybrid approaches also reflects the demands of parents, many of whom do not trust that their children's needs can be addressed in regular classrooms, and of teachers who do not feel they have the skills and capacities to dedicate needed support to

children with disabilities within a mainstreamed system. Furthermore, some children with disabilities are also concerned that they may be bullied or stigmatised if they are forced to attend regular classes and appreciate opportunities to be educated where they feel safe.

There is a recognition that the advantages of inclusive education will eventually materialise as resources hopefully grow and as more teachers become confident in their skills for inclusive education. Therefore, investments should be continued to train teachers and improve infrastructure to improve the learning environment in regular classrooms. Commitments to inclusive education should remain intact, even if the pace and extent to which these changes will be realised will vary. Paths to reach these goals need to reflect what is being learnt about what works at school level within systems that lack resources to deliver education that fully respond to student needs. This pluralistic approach to adapting processes to reflect local needs and resources, while retaining principles of inclusion, is increasingly being acknowledged as appropriate also in the Global North and is inescapable if quality learning is to be supported in countries facing severe resource deficits.



Braille, photo: Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted