

What works to improve educational outcomes of children with disabilities in school?

The question and the problem

For people with disabilities, a major determinant of social and economic outcomes in adulthood, is access to, and the adequacy of, education in childhood and adolescence. Yet, children with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in, or complete, school. Further, there are substantial gaps in the evidence regarding what works to improve educational outcomes of children with disabilities in school. Educational outcomes, here include academic achievement, pass rates, and grade completion. Many studies measure child behaviour and proxy or distal outcomes in response to various interventions, but not actually how children with disabilities do in these domains. This is particularly the case in LMIC, where there is a dearth data about the effects of educational policies and practices on child educational outcomes.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation #1:** More evidence is needed if we are to understand how, and for whom, inclusive education works in LMIC, particularly in relation to academic achievement.
- **Recommendation #2:** More evidence is needed regarding educational outcomes of children with disabilities in response to various interventions, as these are seldom measured in LMIC.
- **Recommendation #3:** Specific guidance on how to integrate best-practices from the special and inclusive education literature needs to be developed and tested in LMIC, in order for evidence-based pedagogies to be accessible and implementable in low-resource settings.
- **Recommendation #4:** We need to involve parents in school-based educational interventions.
- **Recommendation #5:** At the policy level, children with disabilities need to be defined and included in mainstream education sector planning and budgeting.

“Whilst education is much more than academic achievement and there were a number of articles that focused on the social benefits of inclusion, nevertheless the absence of discussions and evidence around academic performance is concerning.”

[Wapling, 2016]

Challenges

Challenge #1: Inclusive education has been universally recommended in LMIC schools, and yet there is a lack of evidence regarding the impact of inclusion on educational outcomes for children with disabilities in resource-constrained settings.

- In HIC, research suggests that the academic achievement of students with and without special educational needs seems to be comparable or better in inclusive classes.
- However, in LMIC, there is a dearth of data concerning the impact of inclusive settings on educational outcomes for children with disabilities.
- In LMIC, where school systems may be over-stretched and human resources lacking, children with disabilities may not be benefiting from an inclusive classroom environment as much as their peers in inclusive HIC classrooms, and this may be more the case for children with certain types of impairments.
- More data are needed where educational outcomes, rather than simply implementation, are rigorously measured.

Challenge #2: Much of the research examines what works for inclusion in school, and measures outcomes related to, but not, educational attainment. There is little research, particularly little in LMIC, concerning direct educational outcomes.

- Although educational attainment is multi-determined and so targeting and measuring outcomes related to other domains of functioning are important, the absence of discussions and evidence around academic performance is concerning.

Challenge #3: Although evidence exists on specific educational techniques which improve school outcomes of children with disabilities exist and have been documented in the HIC literature, there is a need to grow the evidence base in LMIC, and test manuals for inclusive classrooms.

- There is rigorous research on special educational practices which improve learning for children with disabilities in HIC, and there are manuals developed by NGOs to implement these in LMIC inclusive classrooms.
- However, there is little evidence of these manuals having been rigorously evaluated in relation to their impact on child educational outcomes, in LMIC.

Challenge #4: Although caregiver skills training interventions are common in LMIC for parents of children with disabilities, and the HIC literature calls for caregiver involvement in educational initiatives, it is unclear the degree to which educational interventions are including caregivers, particularly those aimed at improving learning outcomes.

- If we acknowledge that educational outcomes are determined both inside and outside the classroom, in early child development and at home as well as in specific education programs, then parent-led interventions for children with disabilities need to be evaluated beyond their influence on behavioural outcomes, and the impacts of caregiver training on educational outcomes must be explored.

How did we find answers

We conducted a review of reviews, examining systematic, narrative, and other types of review evidence on educational outcomes of students with disabilities (excluding pharmaceutical interventions). This brief draws on evidence from reviews of studies in low-and middle-income countries (LMIC) and high-income countries (HIC). There is an urgent need for more evidence specific to LMIC, with a focus on rigorous measurement of child educational outcomes, over and above existing research concerning program implementation.

Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions

Key Recommendations	Actions
More evidence is needed if we are to understand how, and for whom, inclusive education works in LMIC, particularly in relation to academic achievement.	<i>In LMIC, where school systems may be over-stretched and human resources lacking, children with disabilities may not be benefiting from an inclusive classroom environment as much as their peers in inclusive HIC classrooms, and this may be more the case for children with certain types of impairments. More data are needed where educational outcomes, rather than simply implementation, are rigorously measured.</i>
More evidence is needed regarding educational outcomes of children with disabilities in response to various interventions, as these are seldom measured in LMIC.	<i>There needs to be rigorous measurement of academic performance in interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes amongst children with disabilities.</i>
Integrating best practices from rehabilitation and special education needs to be facilitated in low-resource settings.	<i>Specific guidance on how to integrate best-practices from the special and inclusive education literature needs to be developed and tested in LMIC, in order for evidence-based pedagogies to be accessible and implementable in low-resource settings.</i>
We need to involve parents in educational interventions.	<i>If we acknowledge that educational outcomes are determined both inside and outside the classroom, in early child development and at home as well as in specific education programs, then parent-led interventions for children with disabilities need to be evaluated beyond their influence on behavioural outcomes, and the impacts of caregiver training on educational outcomes must be explored.</i>

Policy priorities

Prior to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, few LMIC defined children with disabilities in their education sector policies and plans. Sustained effort is needed to keep children with disabilities on national policy, planning and budgetary agendas in education. Educational planning needs to be based on context-specific evidence regarding effective, sustainable strategies to improve the educational outcomes of children with disabilities, as current efforts towards inclusive education in LMIC, for instance, are informed by recommendations made for better-resourced contexts. The evidence required to inform policy-making needs to encompass 1) how, and for whom, inclusive education works in LMIC, and 2) rigorous outcome measurement of educational outcomes in response to a range of interventions. Best practices from the fields of special and inclusive education need to be

manualised and where already manualised, tested, in LMIC, in order for evidence-based pedagogies to be accessible and implementable in LMIC.

Conclusion

In LMIC, there is a dearth of literature which explicitly examines educational outcomes such as attainment, qualifications gained, and academic achievement, for people with disabilities. Instead, the majority of the literature included here examined implementation of inclusive education. While the latter is important, the field needs to engage in rigorous evaluation of different models of inclusion and educational interventions, with a focus on their impacts on students with disabilities' educational success and satisfaction. Particular focal areas for action include the need to integrate best practices from rehabilitation and special education into inclusive education settings in low-resource settings, as well as exploring avenues to involve parents in educational interventions for youth with disabilities.

GAPS & RESEARCH NEEDS

There needs to be rigorous measurement of academic performance in interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes amongst children with disabilities.

Further, in LMIC, research on inclusive education needs to go beyond implementation, to examine how and for whom inclusive education has a positive effect on educational outcomes.

Included sources

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