

What evidence is there for the benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities?

The question and the problem

Inclusive education offers a variety of potential academic and social benefits for all students; with as well as without disabilities. However, a common concern among the non-disabled population is the potential negative impacts the inclusion of students with disabilities might have on their non-disabled classmates. These negative beliefs and attitudes by parents and teachers can translate into a lack of implementation of inclusive education. There is substantial evidence for the benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities, however, there is very little evidence on the impact it has on non-disabled students, particularly in LMICs compared to HICs. This evidence brief explores evidence-based recommendations on the benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities and how this issue shapes inclusive education implementation in LMICs.

Recommendations

- Recommendation #1: Ministries of Education should be responsible for the education of all children and inclusive education reform
- Recommendation #2: Raise community awareness of benefits for students without disabilities
- Recommendation #3: Teachers in LMICs need to receive training in special needs education including the benefits inclusive education can bring to students without disabilities
- Recommendation #4: More evidence is needed to understand what impact inclusive education can have on children without disabilities socially and academically in LMICs

“including students with disabilities in regular education classes does not harm non-disabled students and may even confer some academic and social benefits”

[Hehir, 2016]

Challenges

Challenge #1: Lack of widespread implementation of and thus evidence base for quality inclusive education in resource constrained settings limits knowledge on the benefits and implementation of inclusive education for children without disabilities

- Although some research exists on the benefits of inclusive education for children with disabilities in LMICs, of these few cases, there is little evidence on the benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities in LMICs.
- School systems in many LMICs, especially African countries, face many common challenges in implementing inclusive education, such as a lack of administration, limited funding, a lack of specialised teacher training and learning resources as well as difficulties surrounding a clear definition of inclusive education.
- The lack of quality implementation of inclusive education makes it difficult to establish what the benefits are for students without disabilities as inclusive education. Thus in such instances, it may be a lack of evidence due to a lack of cases to have evidence on.

Challenge #2: Negative perceptions towards inclusive education continues to be a challenge for affirmative action in realising the benefits inclusive education can bring to students without disabilities

- Evidence from HICs indicates that students without disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms have better academic outcomes than in non-inclusive classrooms; they perform better and benefit academically from differentiated learning techniques in inclusive classrooms.
- Despite this evidence, many believe that inclusive education might come at the expense of students without disabilities and that accommodations will impede their learning. These negative attitudes, often from parents as well as teachers, are concerning and impede progress within this area.

Challenge #3: There is a need for inclusive training for educators to achieve social benefits as they play a key role in the attitudes in the classroom

- The majority of research indicate that inclusive education provides social benefits for children without disabilities, however students without disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms hold less prejudiced views and are more accepting than those educated in non-inclusive classrooms.
- These social benefits may not be achieved or hindered, as without effective sensitization teachers may reinforce prejudices through the manner in which they draw attention to students with disabilities in the classroom, by the way they act towards them or through their expectations of their capabilities.

Challenge #4: There is a great deal of evidence on the benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities in HICs, however very little evidence can be found in LMICs

- Although there are few cases of inclusive education in resource constrained countries, there is a great need for more evidence on the impact of inclusive education on children without disabilities in similar settings.

How did we find answers?

A review of reviews has been conducted by examining; summaries, policies guides and other types of review evidence on the topic of benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities. All recommendations are based on reviews of literatures from low- and middle-income countries, as well as some reviews of literature including references to high-income countries. This evidence brief is based on the findings of 4 reviews of low- and middle-income country evidence and 3 reviews which covered literature from both low- and middle-income country and high-income country evidence.

Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions

Key Recommendations	Actions
Ministries of Education should be responsible for the education of all children and inclusive education reform	<i>In many LMICs, the responsibility for the education of children with disabilities is divided across separate ministries. We cannot realise inclusive education that benefits both students with and without disabilities without the pivotal role of an MOE in shaping education policy and reforming curriculum and delivery systems. The MoE should include experts in special education who are knowledgeable about the benefits of inclusive education. It is recommended that this come in the form of a subdivision within the MOE</i>
Raise community awareness of benefits for students without disabilities	<i>For effective inclusive education to be realised and students with and without disabilities to benefit, community awareness (including among parents and teachers) should be raised of its benefits and basic concepts. Awareness-building activities should not be limited to information sharing but also include opportunities for personal reflection and dialogue. Greater emphasis can be placed on attitudes of teachers, students and parents in advance of children with disabilities being placed in mainstream schools</i>
Teachers in LMICs need to receive training in special needs education including the benefits inclusive education can bring to students without disabilities	<i>Teachers need to be trained to use a child-centered approach rather than a didactic, teacher-centered approach as required by inclusive education practices. Moreover, educational professionals can regularly engage in collaborative problem solving in which they share ideas and strategies to learn from each other as well as how the inclusion of students with disabilities can serve as a catalyst for school-wide improvement and yield benefits for non-disabled students</i>
More evidence is needed if we are to understand what impact inclusive education has on children without disabilities socially and academically in LMICs	<i>Locally driven research are to be further encouraged and facilitated. In cases where inclusive education is being implemented, schools and MOEs need to monitor the progress and impact.</i>

Policy priorities

Few LMICs include persons with disabilities under the remit of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and rather divides the responsibility under multiple ministries. The MOE is pivotal in shaping education policy, thus clearer direction from a sub-division within the MOE is required for children with disabilities to best achieve benefits for both children with and without disabilities. The MOE departments and policymakers need to consist of policy experts in special education who are knowledgeable about the benefits of inclusive education. These experts can ideally be persons with disabilities as well as include the voices of

persons with disabilities to inform and shape education policies. Education policy needs to be based on the evidence of the benefits for both children with and without disabilities to achieve effective inclusive education for all parties involved, both socially and academically. Informed policymaking requires evidence on a) what teacher training is needed to determine a curriculum, and b) evidence on the effects and outcomes of teacher training e.g. in the classroom and the performance of children with and without disabilities.

Conclusion

In LMICs, there is a lack of evidence on the effects and more specifically, the benefits of inclusive education on children without disabilities. In resource-constrained settings, there can be significant challenges in implementing quality inclusive education and the lack of implementation contributes to the lack of evidence. Particular areas that need attention is training of teachers and community awareness to break down the negative attitudes and beliefs that inclusive education will come at the expense of children without disabilities. Education policies need to undergo inclusive education reform and clearer direction should be provided from the respective Ministries of Education. Here, great emphasis is placed on the need for more locally driven research on the impact of inclusive education. In doing so, informed policy decisions can be made that will realise the benefits of both children with and without disabilities.

Included sources

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GAPS & RESEARCH NEEDS

More locally driven research in LMICs is needed to have better evidence on what exactly works and does not work in order to make informed policy decisions.

Evidence is also needed on the impact on children with and without disabilities; and on optimum methods of inclusive education delivery to maximise positive impact for all students

Much of the evidence on the benefits of inclusive education for children without disabilities in LMICs still largely draw from evidence in HIC. Evidence from HIC is used in a large portion of the sources used in this brief, however I have carefully selected the data within these sources pertaining to LMICs