Equal right, equal opportunity: inclusive education for children with disabilities
New GCE policy report on education and disability

Explaining the report
The Global Campaign for Education’s new report focuses on disability and education and highlights the profound challenges faced by children with disabilities in realising their right to education.

In low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are often the most excluded group from education. Even when children with disabilities actually go to school the only education available is often in segregated schools, which acts to further marginalise them from their community.

This report synthesises current evidence around the scale of the challenge, highlighting levels of exclusion from education faced by children with disabilities, as well as outlining the common barriers faced in gaining access to a quality education. It also aims to set out the case for inclusive education systems, where children with disabilities are brought into mainstream schools, and classrooms and schools respond and adapt more effectively to their needs. Finally, the report summarises the policy responses which can help bring down the common barriers – from the family, local communities and national government, through to the international community – setting out clear set of areas of action and policy recommendations for governments, donors and the international community.

The report has been produced with the support of GCE Member Handicap International.

Core narrative
In most low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than any other group of children. Children with disabilities have very low rates of initial enrolment. Even if they do attend school, children living with disabilities are often more likely to drop out and leave school early. In some countries, having a disability can more than double the chance of a child not being in school, compared to their non-disabled peers. It is, therefore, unsurprising that in many countries children with disabilities make up the vast majority of those out of school. For those children with disabilities who actually manage to enter classrooms, the quality and form of schooling received – often in segregated schools – can act to powerfully compound exclusion from the mainstream and confirm pre-existing societal notions about disability.

Tackling this severe discrimination is a matter of urgency on several counts. Firstly, this denial of the right to education robs children of the future benefits of an education and the opportunity to access other rights – for example, by limiting employment opportunities or participation in civic affairs later in life. It restricts full participation in society, exacerbating exclusion, and can limit a person’s chance of escaping poverty. This and other barriers faced by people living with disabilities means they are usually among the poorest of the poor.

A lack of focus on educating disabled children is also impacting on the chances of delivering on the international promise to achieve universal primary education – the globally-agreed target set out in the Education For All and Millennium Development Goals. It is also the right of every child,
regardless of disability, to receive a good education. In 2006 the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) established inclusive education as the key mechanism to deliver the right to education for disabled children. Inclusive education systems can be defined as all children learning together in mainstream classrooms in their locality or community, irrespective of the different range of abilities and disabilities, with teaching methods, materials and school environments that address the needs of all girls and boys. The creation of inclusive education systems is fundamental to achieving better quality in education and realising the human rights of all children, improving educational standards and helping to address other marginalised groups.

In spite of this commitment, the exclusion of children with disabilities from mainstream education remains profound and few countries have the necessary national legislation, policy, targets and plans for inclusive education of disabled children. Even when governments do have national policies or legislation in place, implementation via concrete policies, plans and strategies are weak, while the financing to deliver inclusive education for all is woefully short. Adopting appropriate legislation and developing policies or national plans of action are important starting points to achieve inclusion for all. Even when there are appropriate laws and policies too often implementation is very weak and resources for rolling out plans are woefully short. National governments and donors must provide the capacity, resources and leadership to implement ambitious national plans on inclusion.

A substantial problem faced in realising the right to education of children with disabilities is a vast data hole, which leaves their educational needs invisible to policy makers. In order to plan and monitor effectively, governments must have reliable data which enables them to set bold, yet realistic, targets and then measure them.

Schools and classrooms across the developing world are too inaccessible or are not adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. Making schools and classrooms accessible and relevant for all will also need investments in accessible and appropriate equipment and learning materials, as well as accessible infrastructure. Ensuring there are enough appropriately trained teachers for all will also involve substantial investments in more teachers that are adequately prepared and trained, and who are supported to work in inclusive ways, with specialist teaching support where necessary.

Finally, social attitudes are a powerful driver of the marginalisation of disabled children in and from education. Negative attitudes towards disabled children’s capacity limit their chance of going to any school. Even when education is offered, there is a widely held belief that ‘special’ schools are the most viable option. Policy measures must also be reinforced with public awareness raising campaigns which tackle often deeply held attitudes towards disabled children’s educational projects, which often act as a powerful barrier to schooling for many children with disabilities.

Key facts and statistics from the report

Global prevalence of disability
- The estimated 1 billion people who live with a disability – comprising approximately 15% of the global population – face a multitude of barriers to participating equally in society.
- Globally, an estimated 93 million children – or 1 in 20 of those aged up to 14 years of age – live with a moderate or severe disability.
- Countries have different levels of disability, according to different contexts. For instance, Bangladesh is home to approximately 160 million people. It is estimated that 15 to 17% of the population is living with some form of disability. Another survey found there were 2.6 million children with disabilities in Bangladesh. In the Palestinian Occupied Territories this reaches 7%.

Levels of exclusion from education
- Children with disabilities are often more likely to be out of school than any other groups of children. In some countries, living with a disability can more than double the chance of a child not being in school.
- In Malawi and Tanzania a child with a disability is twice as likely to have never attended school as a child without a disability.
- In Burkina Faso, having a disability increases the risk of children being out of school by two and a half times. According to another study, enrolment rates at primary school level reached 78% in 2012 in Burkina Faso. However, it is estimated that only 16% of physically disabled children have access to a primary education.
- In Bolivia it is estimated that 95% of the population aged 6 to 11 years are in school, but only 38% of children with disabilities are in school – more than doubling the chances of not being in school.
- A World Bank analysis of data from 14 household surveys found that the gap in primary school attendance rates between disabled and non-disabled children ranges from 10 percentage points in India to close to 60 percentage points in Indonesia. For secondary education, this ranged from 15 percentage points in Cambodia to 58 in Indonesia.
- Even if they do attend school, children with disabilities are far more likely to leave school early. In Tanzania, children with disabilities who attended primary school progressed to higher levels of education at only half the rate of children without disabilities.
- Children with disabilities often make up the vast majority of those out of school in many countries. For instance, in Nepal, 85% of all children out-of-school are disabled.
- Girls with disabilities fare even worse than boys. In Malawi one study showed that more girls with disabilities have never attended school compared to boys with disabilities. This translates into lower literacy rates as adults: for instance, national statistics in Ghana show that the literacy rate for non-disabled adults stands at 70%, which reduces to 56% for adults living with disabilities, and this drops to just 47% for women with disabilities.
- The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) indicates in its disability survey that more than one third of Palestinians with disabilities didn’t receive any education, and that 60% of children with disabilities are not enrolled in education. The survey findings also show that one third of those who were enrolled dropped out, and that 22% of the dropouts were attributed to the individual’s disability. In addition, the report shows that 53.3% of the persons with disabilities in Palestine are illiterate.
- In Ethiopia, according to the Ministry of Education, fewer than 3% of children with disabilities have access to primary education, and access to schooling decreases rapidly as children move up the education ladder.

Schooling provided to children with disabilities
- In Uganda, only 5% of children with disabilities have access to education within inclusive settings in regular schools, while 10% have access through ‘special’ or segregated schools.
- Italy is the only European country in which almost all disabled pupils (over 99%) were included in mainstream schools.

Policies: commitments, implementation & gaps
- As of September 2013, 133 countries and the European Union had ratified the UN Convention of the Right of People with Disabilities - another 23 have signed but not yet ratified. The commitment to inclusive education is a legal obligation through Article 24 of the CRPD.
- From a survey of 28 countries reviewed, only 10 had some concrete policy commitment to include children with disabilities, 13 made some mention of disability but with no detail or strategy, while 5 had no mention at all of children with disabilities.
Most countries spend far too little on inclusive education. For instance, a 2008 World Bank evaluation reported that only 1% of spending under the Education for All policy in India was on inclusive education for children with disabilities.

It is often assumed that the costs of providing inclusive education are high, but this isn’t always the case. For example, one study estimated that making buildings accessible represents less than 1% of total construction costs, while the costs of having two school systems—i.e. mainstream and ‘special’—can be much higher. An OECD report estimates that the average cost of putting students with special educational needs in segregated placements is seven to nine times higher than educating them in general classrooms.

Tackling community and social stigma through awareness raising can help children with disabilities go to school. A three-year project in a disadvantaged community near Allahabad, India, resulted in children with disabilities attending school for the first time, more people with disabilities participating in community forums, and more people bringing their children with disabilities for vaccination and rehabilitation.

A 2007 survey by Education International showed that large numbers of teachers expressed concerns about inclusion due to a lack of training and professional development, as well as equipment and other teaching resources. It’s key to help train and support teachers to teach inclusively.

What next?

- The report in English to be available on December 3rd for the United Nations' International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which will be internally distributed within GCE, and beyond.
- The materials will also be translated and published, in print and web formats, in each of GCE’s five official languages.
- The report will then be used as a lobby tool in the run up to Global Action Week. We will also use the report to shape our public communications and our campaign plans.

You can view the disability page on the GCE website:

You can download the report in English here:
http://campaignforeducation.org/docs/reports/Equal%20Right,%20Equal%20Opportunity_WEB.pdf