



Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools 2030 Contexts

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Kenya



Overview: Defining the concept and terminology of inclusive education

Inclusive education has progressed in recent years in Kenya, with the government having domesticated various international agreements in its own legal framework.¹ Inclusive education is promoted through the inclusion of learners with special needs and disabilities in regular schools, rather than in special schools or special units. As defined in the 2018 [Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities](#), inclusive education is understood as an approach according to which 'learners and trainees with disabilities are provided with appropriate educational interventions within regular institutions of learning with reasonable accommodations and support.'² [The National Special Needs Education Policy Framework](#) of 2009 offered a broad definition of learners with special needs, including children with and without disabilities, and gifted and talented children. This definition was further refined in the 2018 Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities to mean learners with hearing impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blindness,

physical impairments, intellectual and developmental disabilities, specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia), cerebral palsy, speech and language difficulties, multiple disabilities, autism and albinism. This definition also acknowledges other forms of special needs, such as gifted and talented learners and students affected by psychosocial disorders and chronic illness.

Whilst the emphasis has been on promoting education for learners with special needs and disabilities in regular schools, policy recognises the need to draw on the education services provided by special institutions, special units in regular institutions and home-based education, specifically for learners and trainees with severe disabilities and under vulnerable circumstances.³

Despite advances made in policy, evidence suggests that efforts to guide implementation are fairly weak and that this means practice is not meeting the aspirations of policy.

¹ Ruguru Ireri et al., 2020 | ² Kenya - Inclusion chapter, Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER), <https://www.education-profiles.org>, Retrieved May 2022. (Hereafter: Kenya - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022)

Views from teachers and programme staff

Teachers consulted felt that inclusive education used to be a topic more frequently talked about across all levels of the education system, however now most of the focus is on primary and early years education. When speaking about inclusive education and special education, this can be understood to refer to gifted and talented students, but is also considered as education appropriate for those with specific needs. For example, they mentioned that Kenya has schools for children with cerebral palsy or mental disabilities.

In general, students with physical and mental disabilities are those most targeted through inclusive and special education initiatives.

In the past the term 'special needs' was used more frequently, however nowadays it is more common to say '**challenged**' or '**abled differently**' when speaking about learners with disabilities.

'All children are talented in their own ways, all have magic in them.'

Primary school teacher, Mombasa



Quantifying learners with learning disabilities

Data from the Kenyan Ministry of Education reports that 11.4% of children aged between 3 and 21 years old have special needs or a disability, which is relatively evenly distributed amongst male and female children. The majority of children with disabilities and special needs live in rural areas (76.2%) compared to 27.4% who live in urban areas, suggesting that there may be a need to geographically focus resource for specialised teaching and infrastructure. Proportionately, this is slightly higher than the urban-rural split amongst the general population, with 72% of the population residing in rural areas.⁴

Although a significant number of children are enrolled in schools, there is a high dropout rate.⁵ Data from the Kenya National Survey on Special Needs Education conducted in 2014 found that 6.8% of children 21 years old and below reporting to have a disability self-reported that they had a learning disability.⁶

In the subsequent National Survey on Children with Disabilities and Special Needs in Education conducted in 2016-17, the category of learning disabilities was not included in the scope of the study because of the need for diagnostic tests to have been run over a period of time to identify and categorise learners.⁷

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Policy and legislative commitments

Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005 identified that existing provision for learners with disabilities, such as special schools and special units, only catered to learners with disabilities ‘in the areas of hearing, visual, mental or physical challenge’, which ignored other areas of special needs including gifted and talented, psychosocially different, autism, specific learning difficulties and communication disorders.⁸ Following this, the government released the [National Special Needs Education Policy Framework](#) in 2009, aiming to remove barriers for learners with disabilities, which they classified into 22 categories, of which one is ‘learning disabilities’. Building on this, the [2018 Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities](#) aims to develop specific procedures and guidelines for assessment, early identification and

interventions for learners and trainees with disabilities, including learning disabilities, as well as to establish new multidisciplinary Education Assessment Resource Centres (EARCs) at the national, county and sub-county levels. The policy moves beyond segregated education as had been encouraged before and advocates the right of every learner with a disability to be enrolled in a regular classroom.⁹ Despite mention of learning disabilities in policy since 2009, in the [Basic Education Statistical Booklet](#) of 2019 the Ministry of Education reports only on five categories of learners with special needs: hearing, intellectual, physical, visual and multiple,¹⁰ which can be assumed to be due to a paucity of data on learning disabilities.



³ Kenya - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022 | ⁴ The World Bank Data, retrieved November 2022 | ⁵ Ministry of Education, 2018 | ⁶ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, nd | ⁷ Ministry of Education, 2018 | ⁸ Ohba & Malenya, 2020 | ⁹ Kenya - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022 | ¹⁰ Ohba & Malenya, 2020



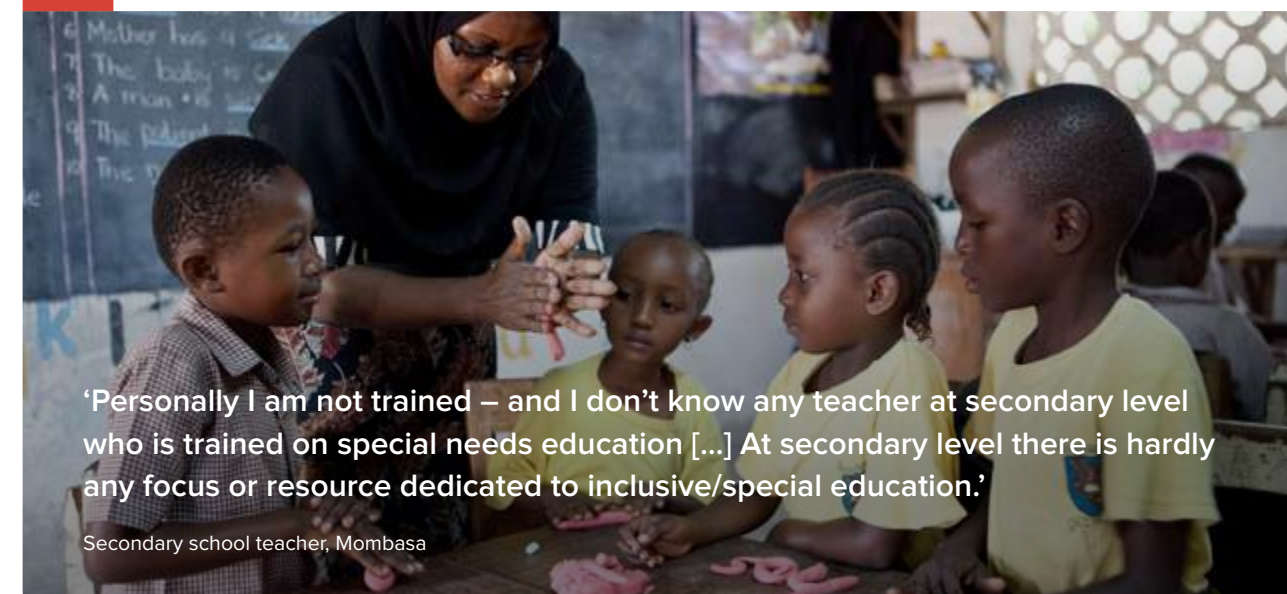
Teacher training provision

Teacher training on supporting learners with disabilities is provided at the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) for pre-service and in-service training, but teachers commented that this is only for pre-primary and primary teachers. Kenyatta University also provides a bachelor programme with a specialisation in special needs education. However, the 2018 Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities acknowledged that regular teaching education does not adequately incorporate training to equip teachers to cater for the needs of learners with disabilities.¹¹

Findings from teachers supported this conclusion, as those consulted for this study

considered it to be rare particularly for secondary teachers to have received training on supporting learners with disabilities because training opportunities are mostly for pre-primary and primary teachers. Besides this, training may have been provided by NGOs implementing inclusive education projects.

For example, one teacher had worked on a UNICEF project that sought to integrate street children into regular schools, and was trained on inclusive education as part of this. Knowing that there are limited opportunities to gain knowledge in this area, this teacher felt it was down to individuals to proactively share knowledge with colleagues.



‘Personally I am not trained – and I don’t know any teacher at secondary level who is trained on special needs education [...] At secondary level there is hardly any focus or resource dedicated to inclusive/special education.’

Secondary school teacher, Mombasa

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Diagnosis of learning disabilities

As laid out in policy in 2018, the role of Education Assessment Resource Centres (EARCs) is to identify and assess the needs of children with disabilities and then identify the most suitable education services for them. The centres are staffed by a variety of professionals including teachers and social and medical workers who involved the community in early identification, assessment, intervention and placement of learners considered to have special needs.¹²

However, teachers consulted mentioned that there are only two assessment centres for secondary level in Mombasa, and these are both for physical disabilities. When prompted to reflect on the mechanisms in place to diagnose learners who may have a learning disability, teachers were frank about the many other challenges that students face that may account for low learning levels. They explained that teachers are not only extremely busy managing large class sizes, but they are also coping with significant social and emotional problems in their classrooms. Therefore, if a child is struggling it is difficult for teachers to know whether it is a learning disability or an external factor negatively affecting their learning outcomes. With the pressures that teachers face in the classroom, this leaves them little time to identify learners who they might otherwise refer on to specialists.

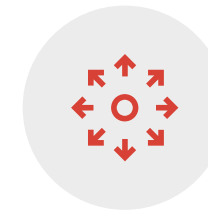
¹¹ Ministry of Education, 2018a | ¹² Kenya - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022

‘Teachers are firefighting the social problems – they are not trained for dealing with disabilities or mental health challenges. They are too busy dealing with the manifestations of these problems – such as children not coming to school.’

Secondary school teacher, Mombasa

‘Due to the challenges of large classes and a push to complete the syllabus within the stipulated time, child/learner observation is waning out. At the early grades teachers are not able to note learners exhibiting learning difficulties in good time for referral and/or assessment.’

AKF Kenya staff member



Current attitudes and awareness of disability

It was felt by AKF staff that teachers should have a good understanding and awareness of inclusive education and disability because the teacher training curriculum has a unit dedicated to inclusive education and disability. What is lacking is not the awareness but the resources to take action and implement. Regarding learning disabilities, there was felt to be lower awareness

apart from where teachers have taken the Special Education Needs option in post graduate education or in-service professional development courses. That said, teachers had commented that there is limited access to professional development opportunities and that many would not be aware of methods and strategies to implement inclusive practice.



Education provision, services and support for learners with disabilities

Teachers reported that there tends to be better provision and support for learners with disabilities at early years and primary school level. At ECD level, regular schools are equipped with EARCs that provide additional support for learners with disabilities, including mental disabilities and physical disabilities. Students receive additional support, however they are integrated in regular classes with other students. When learners transition to secondary and appear to have lower learning levels, sometimes secondary schools blame the primary level for not preparing students adequately. Despite better levels of support

early on, children with special needs frequently end up at challenging schools with underperforming students. That said, some children do very well and are determined to learn, especially where teachers act on their own initiative and make a special effort to support the child. An example was given where a school paid for medication for a child who could not afford it. This then allowed them to focus better on school and sit their exams. Even though they didn't pass the first time the school allowed the student to sit their exam again to improve their grade.

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Challenges and priority areas

Despite best efforts in introducing policy commensurate with international legislation on inclusive education, the policy framework lacks concrete plans to operationalise the implementation of inclusive practices. Adding to this, there has historically been a lack of monitoring and evaluation,¹³ which has made it difficult to analyse current practice and devise evidence informed action plans. This is compounded by a combination of poor attitudes towards inclusive education by some key stakeholders, a lack of funds and resources to adequately tailor provision to ensure equal access to all learners, an inflexible curriculum, and a lack of specialised staff trained on appropriate pedagogical techniques.¹⁴ This has resulted in a high drop-out rate and low transition rate from primary to secondary school for learners with disabilities.¹⁵

Teachers consulted spoke extensively about the challenging socio-economic circumstances which may even prohibit students coming to school in the first place. In coastal Kenyan communities children grow up dealing with many economic and social issues – such as substance abuse, difficult family circumstances, health issues, social tension

and bullying. As a result, children come to school with many emotional and mental health challenges. Some children have to work to support their family, and they are then too tired to attend school, or they don't want to turn up late so don't come at all.

Teachers expressed that many children face barriers and so it is an achievement for them to get to school in the first place, though it is difficult for a teacher to determine whether the cause is a disability or other socio-economic factors.

In terms of priorities, the teachers and staff consulted felt strongly that what is required is more parental involvement in the education of their children. The new Competency Based Curriculum in Kenya, which allows learners to select their subject areas at age 11, was felt to offer an opportunity to reduce the push for academic excellence. There was hope that this may offer a new way of engaging and keeping students motivated in their learning as they have the agency to choose their own pathway. However, this will require buy in from both parents and teachers.



'We are in need of parental involvement. Good school-community relations are important for influencing change.'

Primary school teacher, Mombasa

¹³ Ruguru Ireri et al., 2020 | ¹⁴ Ruguru Ireri et al., 2020 | ¹⁵ Ohba & Malenya, 2020



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