



Understanding  
Learning Differences  
Across Schools2030  
Contexts

Country profiles | Uganda



## COUNTRY PROFILES

## Uganda



### Overview: Defining the concept and terminology of inclusive education

The Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda defines inclusive education as a system which ‘... embraces modifications in curricular, teaching methods, teaching/learning resources, medium of communication and adjusting the learning environment to meet individual learning needs. It is learner centred, flexible, and adjustable to the individual needs and potential of every child.’<sup>1</sup> The Ministry’s understanding of ‘children with special educational needs’ extends beyond those who have physical or other disabilities to cover pupils who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons including ‘mild learning disabilities or profound cognitive impairment; developmental delays that catch up quickly or remain entrenched; occasional panic attacks or serious psychiatric problems’.<sup>142</sup>

Compared to other countries in East Africa,

Uganda has more explicit mention of learning disabilities in government documents and there are more NGOs working to support those with disabilities in the country.

Terms used across government strategy and research literature include ‘slow learners’, ‘learning difficulties’, and ‘learners with barriers arising from disability’. Education of these populations takes place both in mainstream schools, referred to as ‘all inclusive’ (where most students with disabilities learn), ‘special schools’, and ‘attached units’ that are situated alongside mainstream schools.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, Special Needs and Inclusive Education | <sup>2</sup> Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport, 2015 | <sup>3</sup> Education For All: Making Education Inclusive, Accessible to Uganda’s Children With Special Needs, The World Bank, Retrieved May 2022

### Views from teachers and programme staff

Teachers and AKF staff consulted felt inclusive education to be a topic of significance in the Ugandan education system. It was understood to refer to education suited to a range of learners, such as those with physical and intellectual disabilities. However, the group

made a point that it is not necessarily those with learning disabilities that underperform, but also children from poorer backgrounds. In terms of terminology, ‘special needs’ or ‘**children with special needs**’ is most commonly used to refer to learners who have disabilities. ‘**Time takers**’ is also a commonly used term which is found in teacher training materials to refer to students disadvantaged for a range of reasons, such as ability or economic status. The acronym ‘SNE’ is used for Special Needs Education.

Whilst it was felt that supporting learners with disabilities was an important priority, the teachers made a case for opening up the category of special needs. They spoke of a need to focus on the large proportion of learners who are disadvantaged, for those learners that are living in extreme poverty or young girls who are forced into the sex industry.



**‘Let’s also speak about disadvantaged as a term – I’d rather use ‘disadvantaged’ than special needs.’**

Secondary school teacher, Kampala



### Quantifying learners with learning disabilities

Data on students and disability is collected by the Bureau of Statistics. It implements a Household Survey every ten years which was most recently conducted in 2019/2020. Questions in the survey assess the degree to which a disability impacts one’s day-to-day activities. For example, among the total adult population, 2.3% reported they have a difficulty remembering/concentrating disability.<sup>4</sup> The World Bank also collects data on students in

Uganda and found that 2.3% of children ages 6-12 don’t attend school because of a disability and out of those students enrolled in a secondary school 0.6% are recorded as having a special learning need.<sup>5</sup> The World Bank estimates that 2.5 million children in Uganda have a disability that hinders their access to education.<sup>6</sup> However, disaggregated data on disability is limited, especially for learning differences.

## Country profiles | Uganda



## Policy and legislative commitments

The Department for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (SN&IE) is housed within the Ministry of Education and Sport. In 2011 a [Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy](#) was developed aiming to increase access to schooling for persons with special learning needs, strengthen programmes and initiatives for SN&IE, increase implementation of SN&IE initiatives, and promote sporting programmes for learners with special needs.<sup>7</sup> However, this policy is still in draft form. The Ministry of Education also developed a department within the National Curriculum Development Centre consisting of a panel of 18 specialists in education of learners with special learning needs. With support from the US Agency on International Development (USAID), the panel advises on modifications to

the primary school curriculum to suit diverse learning needs and education strategies. This has led to the distribution of supplementary guidelines to schools on the adapted curriculum for learners with special education needs.<sup>8</sup>

In 2014, the Ministry initiated a Special Needs Education Programme to provide guidance on the delivery of SN&IE, including testing and special education materials. Listed amongst its aims was the development of an early identification assessment and intervention model for children with invisible impairments, as well as the upskilling of teachers in special needs education. However, the programme performed poorly due equipment shortages, the lack of teacher trainings implemented and funding shortages.<sup>9</sup>



## Teacher training provision on inclusive education

Since 2005, the primary school thematic curriculum has asked teachers to use learner-centred methods and to adapt the direction of lessons considering children's reactions and feedback.<sup>10</sup> District-based Teacher Development and Management System Centres

play an important role in implementing training in inclusive education. Most of the centres coordinate special tutors who have received training in special needs education and inclusion. These tutors are expected to provide supervisory support to teachers in schools,

organise in-service training, develop educational materials and upgrade teacher training centres. However, in-service training opportunities are limited and many teachers are not sufficiently equipped to assist learners in an inclusive school.

As a result, a number of NGOs have invested in teacher training programmes on inclusion and in health professionals who are able to support schools in identifying children with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

A shortage of expertise was also highlighted by teachers consulted, who explained that training isn't provided for non-specialist SNE teachers. From their experience, there are too few specialist teachers to meet the demand.

What's more, when teachers have large numbers of students it is very difficult for them to know how to cater to students with special needs. Without the training this relies on the teacher's own initiative and innovation to include that child.

**'We need specialised teacher training for dealing with SNE, but teachers are not prepared. It is down to the teacher's own innovation in dealing with special needs.'**

Secondary school teacher, Kampala

Respondents felt there is also a need to help teachers in facing the profound and complex social challenges, as teachers are not prepared or qualified to know how to respond.



## Diagnosis of learning disabilities

Comments from focus group respondents gave the impression of very little support from the system when it comes to diagnosing learners with learning differences. Whilst some common difficulties amongst students were felt to be dyslexia, hyperactivity disorders, visual and hearing impairments, respondents considered that teachers are in a difficult position to support learners who are undiagnosed with little support and training offered. Children with disabilities

are often kept at home, which makes it even more challenging for teachers to understand the difficulties they are facing so that they may reach out for support.

One of the respondents shared that she discovered her son was dyslexic thanks to a tutor who supports her son at home. It was only thanks to this tutor who had received training in India that they had an understanding of learning disabilities.

## Country profiles | Uganda



## Current attitudes and awareness of inclusive practice and disability

Focus group respondents spoke of a lack of awareness on learning disabilities especially amongst parents, with some hiding their children at home or even using corporal punishment if their child underperforms at school. It was explained that in some cases children prefer to remain silent in class rather than risk making a mistake or appearing less capable than other students. The teachers gave examples of having students with a stammer in their classes, saying that these students preferred to remain silent and not talk in class, rather than expose their condition for fear of repercussion.

**‘Learners with learning differences are called daft, stupid, slow. There is a lack of awareness.’**

AKF Uganda staff member

As a result, learners with difficulties are deemed slow or sick and negative attitudes from parents keep disabilities hidden away from society and the school.



## Education provision, services and support for learners with disabilities

Those consulted expressed that the focus on inclusion and special education takes place predominantly at the primary school level. Whilst there is a lot of talk about inclusion, respondents felt it wasn't materialising in practice at country level. One of the teachers spoke of her school which has a SNE unit -

**‘My school has an SNE unit with braille machines for blind students, and caters for those with physical impairment. These children learn together with other children, and in the evening they are trained on braille. They are also accommodated in the school.’**

Primary school teacher, Arua

4 Uganda Bureau of Statistics: The Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20, 2021 | 5 Special Needs Education in Uganda: Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #4 Concerns Quality and Inclusive Education, The World Bank, Retrieved May 2022 | 6 Education For All: Making Education Inclusive, Accessible to Uganda's Children With Special Needs, The World Bank, Retrieved May 2022 | 7 Policies & Regulations, Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Education and Sports | 8 Uganda - Inclusion chapter, Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER), <https://www.education-profiles.org>, Retrieved May 2022 (Hereafter: Uganda - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022) | 9 Uganda - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022 | 10 Uganda - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022 | 11 Uganda - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022

However, not many schools have SNE units as these are only in specific designated schools. Sometimes schools will partner together to share materials and resources as the materials are expensive. However, this is on an ad-hoc informal basis where there are connections between individual schools/teachers, and is not formally guided by the education system. Whilst students may understandably struggle in large mainstream classes, in other settings such as special schools learners with disabilities can score highly. In these circumstances the learners have greater adaptations such as extra time and examinations are conducted orally rather than in writing.

AKF staff shared that most schools have at least three streams per class dividing learners into groups of: time takers, average students and high achievers, which allows time takers to be given more attention from teachers. In terms of where support for disabled learners comes from, schools sometimes partner with government or NGOs to work on inclusion.

**‘Most of our schools have at least three streams per class and students’ classes are divided into three: class for time takers, for average students and for high achievers. This comes with an advantage of children learning according to their levels as time takers are usually given more attention. But from the students’ perspective it may also come with the shame of being singled out as time takers.’**

AKF East Africa staff member

As found in some other East African countries, the language of instruction is a key consideration for ascertaining students’ performance in assessments. Staff felt that the switching of languages between English medium at pre-school, to local languages until Primary 3, and back to English at Primary 4 to be disruptive to children’s learning, and particularly for struggling learners.



## Challenges and priorities

The Ugandan Ministry of Education cites insufficient funding, a weak policy framework, limited data and insufficient training for teachers as barriers to implementing its imagined inclusive education framework.

The Education Services Commission 2018/2019 Report shares that bureaucracy has been a major inhibitor of implementing inclusive education practices.<sup>12</sup> The Uganda Constitution stipulates that public financing for special needs



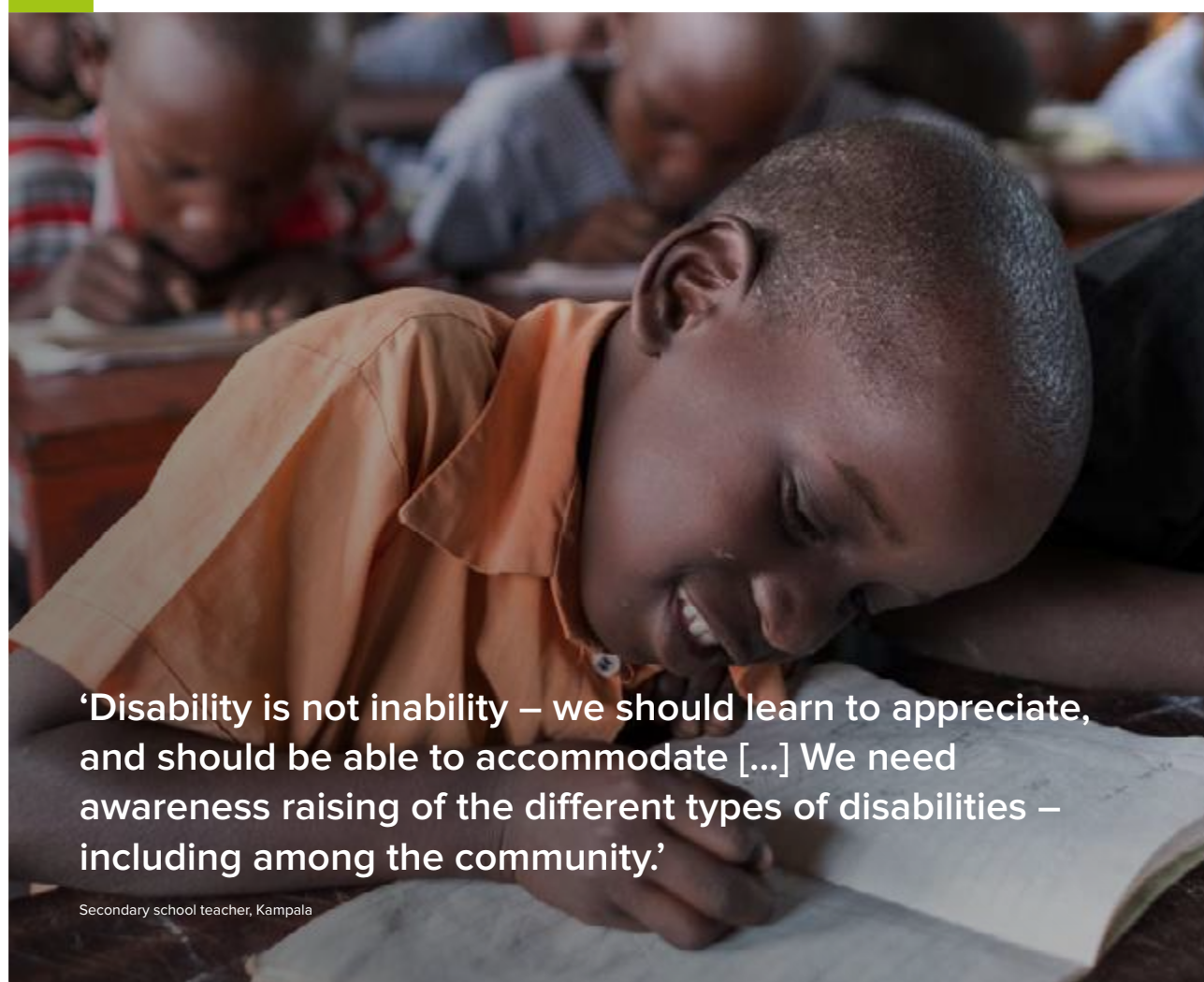
## Country profiles | Uganda

and inclusive education should account for 10 percent of the education budget, but it currently stands at 0.1%, an indication that more needs to be done to resource the teaching and learning of learners with disability.<sup>12</sup>

Teachers felt strongly that a lack of awareness and negative attitudes amongst parents that stigmatise those with disabilities, as well as a lack of school infrastructure that recognises differences were major factors in limiting the

advance of inclusion in education. They called for national bodies responsible for teacher training to design and introduce training that prepares all teachers for supporting learners with special needs. It was also felt that the examination body should prepare its trainers on the administration of exams for those with special needs. Other steps felt necessary were on basic education provision, such as having enough learning materials across all fields of learning.

<sup>12</sup> Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2018, Provision of Inclusive Education in Uganda: What are the challenges? | <sup>13</sup> Education For All: Making Education Inclusive, Accessible to Uganda's Children With Special Needs, The World Bank, Retrieved May 2022





# Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools2030 Contexts

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