



# Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools 2030 Contexts

Discussion

# Discussion

## Summary table of findings

This table displays a summary of some key information points that the data gathered through a review of literature, interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires report on.

It is apparent that most countries have developed policies or plans to promote inclusive education in their context, and that most governments recognise the learning differences population amongst those who benefit from inclusive education. Whilst this is positive, it is important to note that this does not equate to inclusive education being implemented in practice (as will be discussed below). There is a more mixed picture for the current provision of teacher education on inclusive education and supporting learners

with diverse needs, where in most cases this is either just being introduced or is limited. Whilst there is some form of diagnostic system across the majority of countries, provision is either not widespread/consistent, focuses mainly on physical disabilities, is offered under a medical model of disability or relies on teachers who are not sufficiently trained. Findings also reveal that the majority of countries lack a reliable monitoring and reporting function to record statistics related to learners with disabilities in education.

	Policies/plans/strategies promoting inclusive education have been developed	Policies/government documents make mention of the learning differences population <sup>1</sup>	General pre/in-service teacher training covers inclusive education	A diagnostic system is in place to diagnose learning disabilities	Reliable data on disability is available	Most commonly used terms to refer to students with disabilities
Afghanistan	✓*	✓	✗	✗	✗	Child/girl/person with disability
Brazil	✓	✓	—	—	—	Children with special needs
India	✓	✓	✓	—	—	Children with Disabilities (CWD) Children with Special Needs (CWSN) Specially Enabled Children (SEC)
Kenya	✓	✓	—	—	✓	Challenged/abled differently
Kyrgyzstan	✓	✓	✗	—	✗	Children with SEND Children with disabilities
Pakistan	✓	✓	—	—	✓	Special children Handicapped children
Portugal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Children with additional learning support needs (though this is broader than students with disabilities)
Tanzania	✓	✓	✗	—	—	Child/learner/pupil with disabilities
Uganda	—	✓	✗	✗	—	Children with special needs Time takers

\* it remains unclear whether the new government will uphold these policies

<sup>1</sup> Refers to either: children with special (educational) needs, learning disabilities, specific learning disabilities, general developmental disorders, individual learning differences, processing disorders, those facing learning barriers resulting from pupil/environment interaction

# Summary of progress and challenges

## PROGRESS

### Societal attitudes are changing for the better

Across many of the contexts studied it was reported that societal attitudes are changing for the better in terms of how disability is perceived. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, stigmatising attitudes towards those with disabilities are slowly being overturned as special institutions are closed down, and in Afghanistan momentum was building in promoting greater awareness and shaping more positive views towards those with disabilities. In Brazil, with the growing recognition that education should value difference and diversity, the notion of the perfect classroom has been challenged. What's more, some attention is starting to be given over to 'hidden' disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, though more awareness raising is required.

### Inclusive education is high up on the policy agenda

Inclusive education is seen to be a core focus for education policy makers across contexts. This is evident from the fact that almost all of the countries studied have developed policies or government strategies dedicated to advancing inclusive education. Inclusion has become the central focus of education policy making in Portugal, and across contexts this is being seen as a way to address exclusion of the most marginalised groups. In Kyrgyzstan

high-level discussions are ongoing between the government and development partners on how to make their education systems more inclusive. There is also an indication that learning differences are entering the policy agenda, with many policies or government plans mentioning specific learning disabilities and individual learning differences. In Kenya, for example, the government have acknowledged that in the past policies have ignored conditions other than physical impairments such as specific learning difficulties.

### Systems are moving away from segregated education

Most education systems have moved away from providing segregated special education for learners with disabilities, though some special institutions may remain. This has happened most recently in Kyrgyzstan, and in some contexts inclusion is supported by integrated support units in mainstream schools, such as in Portugal, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, though these are limited in number in the East African countries.

### Some attention on contextualised diagnostic tool development

The literature points to a trend in the use of Western developed diagnostic tools being used in global contexts. Some tentative evidence was uncovered of diagnostic tools starting to be developed in contexts where these didn't

exist prior, such as in India. Efforts have also been made to allow teachers to conduct diagnostic assessments in school, for example in Tanzania and in India, though this has had limited success so far.

### Acknowledgement of the importance of early intervention

There was also an acknowledgement of the importance of early intervention, particularly when it comes to supporting the learning journey of children with disabilities and those with additional learning support needs. In Portugal, the early intervention system proves largely successful, and in East African countries, this is identifying learners with the most severe disabilities so that they can get support from an early age through support units attached to pre-schools, although provision is patchy.

## CHALLENGES

### Policy-practice gap

The starkest challenge emerging from this research is the gap between policy and practice when it comes to inclusive education.

Whilst many policies and plans have been developed in line with international recommendations and explicitly specify the marginalised groups that should be targeted,

practice and provision on the ground are not meeting the aspirations laid out on paper.

Across the countries studied, respondents were vocal about a need for government to focus on the implementation of policies, and for more support to be put in place on the ground. Whilst this rang true for all countries, this was felt most strongly to be a priority in the case of India, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Even where children with disabilities are educated in mainstream schools, the evidence indicates that many drop out at secondary level, such as in Afghanistan and in Kenya.

### Evidence gap

Across many of the contexts there is a lack of accurate data that can be used to inform strategy directed at supporting those learners most in need. Indeed, many of the countries studied lack systematic monitoring and reporting systems that report on learners with disabilities and other related statistics as relevant to inclusion – such is the case in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. In other countries, such as India and in East African countries, data may be gathered on disability but reports primarily on those with physical disabilities. Academic research into learning disabilities is starting to gain momentum, for example in Brazil and in India.

However, research is lacking in low- and middle-income countries, in conflict affected settings, and often lacks the perspectives of disabled students themselves.

## Summary of progress and challenges

### Limited expertise in learning disability in the system

Accompanying this lack of research and evidence is a lack of in-country expertise on specific learning disabilities (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia). This is resulting in weak provision of information to be fed through the education system to teachers and policy makers, and also implies that diagnosis is reliant either on tools designed under the medical model of disability or imported from Western contexts.

### Lack of teacher training dedicated to inclusive practice for non-specialist teachers

An area that was felt of crucial importance to the delivery of inclusion was teacher training. Across contexts, it was deemed that current pre- and in-service training models are insufficient at preparing non-specialist teachers to accommodate learners with diverse needs in the classroom, including those with disabilities. Though there may be detailed content available for those enrolling on a specialist training module or course, general teacher education content on inclusive practice is often minimal, only available as an elective option, or is too theoretical. This is resulting in teachers being underprepared to support all learners in school. Specifically, findings point to an even lower level of expertise amongst teachers in learning disabilities. It is of interest to note that even in Portugal where provision for inclusive practice is strong, evidence suggests that teachers feel underprepared to support learners with diverse needs.

### Funding and resource

Whilst policies are calling for change in the system so that learning environments are conducive to inclusion, a lack of equipment, assistive aids and learning materials, as well as inaccessible infrastructure remain a challenge in many contexts. What's more, in the majority of countries studied, teachers attend to large class sizes or even to multiple classes at the same time – this is often the case in East Africa, Pakistan and India. The stretched capacity of teachers is limiting their ability to focus on individual learning needs.

### Lack of awareness / stigmatising beliefs

Though attitudes are changing for the better, negative attitudes persist to the extent that some families continue to keep their children at home, disabled children drop out of school due to bullying, or schools even refuse to allow them to attend in the first place. In rural and remote communities a lack of reliable information sources is preventing a shift in attitudes in line with the principles of inclusion. Stigmatising beliefs were particularly felt to be a challenge in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Uganda and Kyrgyzstan.

### Other compounding issues

The existence of profound and compounding socio-economic factors disadvantaging students is a considerable challenge to being able to deliver inclusive education. Education systems face the challenge of operating in unstable

crisis contexts with acute social problems, where teachers will find themselves dealing with the effects of poverty, substance abuse, unemployment and sexual abuse in the classroom. Faced with such challenges and few resources, teachers have limited opportunity to focus on individual learning needs and learning

differences. Another common challenge identified was that learners are often educated in a language other than their mother tongue, for example in Pakistan, Kenya and Uganda, with the language barrier potentially masking difficulties due to learning disabilities.





**Understanding  
Learning Differences  
Across Schools2030  
Contexts**

---