Planning for inclusion

Education sector planning for promoting inclusive education for disabled children

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With children from marginalised groups constituting the majority of those still missing out on quality primary education, progress towards Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will stall if considerations of equity and inclusion are not placed at the heart of education policies. But how can governments best plan for inclusion when it comes to meeting the challenge of providing education for disabled children, who constitute over one-third of the 75 million primary-aged children still missing out on schooling?

Introduction

In November 2008, Ministers of Education and delegates from 153 Member States, alongside representatives from intergovernmental organisations and civil society, gathered for the 48th session of UNESCO’s International Conference on Education, entitled ‘Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future’. The conclusions of this seminal conference called upon Member States to ‘adopt an inclusive education approach in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of educational policies as a way to further accelerate the attainment of the EFA goals as well as to contribute to building more inclusive societies’.

This article aims to show how this commitment can be met, particularly in relation to providing inclusive education for disabled children, by highlighting five issues critical to ensuring that education sector planning promotes inclusion (see Box 1). The article then draws on findings from a recent review of the ‘disability responsiveness’ of 28 education sector plans to briefly highlight how countries, with a particular focus on those in the Commonwealth, are, on paper, ensuring the inclusion of disabled children in education.

Five critical issues in education sector planning

If an education sector plan is to effectively address the challenge of providing quality education for disabled children in regular provision alongside their peers, it must address five key issues. These are considered here.

1. Definitions and data

How one defines ‘disability’ will impact upon how one addresses the issue of providing services for disabled children. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force on 3 May 2008, recognises that ‘disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’.

This social model of disability sees the failure to include disabled children in regular educational provision as a result of the inflexibility of the system to adapt to meet the needs of every child. As such, the education system itself is often a primary barrier to disabled children’s participation in education.

In relation to data, it is critical for education sector plans to address how data on the numbers and location of disabled children and the prevalence of particular impairments will be collected in order to support planning for inclusive provision for disabled children.
2. Policies and planning

In order to be inclusive, education policy development should be participatory, including with disabled people and their organisations, and policy implementation should be complemented by awareness raising at both national and local levels. Education plans must be linked to both international commitments and national policies. International commitments now include not only the EFA and MDGs and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but also the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This new Convention commits ratifying countries to developing an inclusive education system (see Article 24). National policies to be considered within an education sector plan should include any policies on disability more generally and national poverty reduction strategies.

Policies also need to address the particular barriers to participation and learning in a country. These are likely to include attitudinal, environmental, legal and institutional barriers along with those created by poverty and other disadvantages. Some of the policy implications of these barriers are illustrated in Box 2.

To promote inclusion, education policy must also:

- address demand as well as supply, recognising that as with other disadvantaged groups, including girls, demand will be subject to both economic and attitudinal constraints;
- recognise the reinforcing aspects of different forms of disadvantage and exclusion; and be developed in co-ordination with health, social welfare and employment sectors, particularly in relation to early education, care and post-school transition, and education and training opportunities.

However, policies to promote inclusive education will have little effect if they are not put into practice. As such, education sector plans must identify how policies will be implemented and cover all the critical aspects of provision. Three aspects or stages of planning can be identified:

i. Immediate – focuses on short-term and realisable changes, such as awareness raising, short training sessions for teachers and production of a wider range of instructional materials.

ii. Transitional – recognises the gap between policy aspirations of inclusion and actual baselines of provision in many countries, and the range of demands on education systems. It is concerned with improving and extending education strategies that are responsive to disability and setting longer-term inclusive systems in place (see Box 3 overleaf).

Box 1 Defining inclusion

Inclusion is:

- a recognition of the right to education and its provision in non-discriminatory ways;
- a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range;
- a conviction that schools have a responsibility to educate all children;
- a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners, recognising that all children can learn.

It involves:

- providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and other education settings;
- a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement;
- identification and removal of attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers to participation and learning;
- changes and modifications in structures and strategies as well as in content and approaches to learning;
- enabling teachers and learners to see diversity as a challenge rather than a problem.

It is concerned with adaptation of the education system to the needs of learners and emphasises opportunities for equal participation in formal and non-formal education, but with options for special assistance and facilities as needed, and for differentiation within a common learning framework.

Box 2 Overcoming potential barriers to inclusion in education

- **Attitudinal barriers:** Policies need to stress the right to education. Attitudes can be changed through advocacy and awareness campaigns.
- **Environmental barriers:** Policies need to include physical accessibility of schools, and learning environments, approaches and resources that ensure access to learning, together with other facilities such as accessible toilets and transport.
- **Legal barriers:** Policies need to reinforce rights and non-discrimination with enabling and mandatory legislation in relation to access to education.
- **Institutional barriers:** Schools need to be encouraged to change attitudes and practices to become more inclusive.
- **Resource barriers:** Schools need to be given additional resources, and students and their families may need additional financial support and/or incentives.
iii. Long-term – should include targets for enrolment, for increasing the number of inclusive schools and for associated capacity development.

3. Service delivery and capacity development

The touchstone of policy is the quality of service delivery. As such, education sector plans must address key service delivery issues, some of which are outlined below.

- **Models of provision** Which approach to delivering education for disabled children do plans support? Inclusion implies one educational setting for all children that acknowledges and responds to diversity.

- **Quality of teaching and learning** How will quality education be delivered for disabled children? Although specialist knowledge may be needed in relation to the teaching of children with certain impairments, most educational underachievement is due either to mild impairments, which most teachers should be able to address, and/or to poor or inappropriate quality of teaching and learning resources and environments. As such, training on disability and inclusion should be provided to teachers within pre-service courses and offered as in-service provision. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is also recommended as a way to improve the quality of learning, by supporting early cognitive development and thus helping to prepare children for primary school.

- **School and system management, including partnership with parents and communities** How will an enabling environment for inclusion be created at school and community level? As with schooling in general, the development of leadership and management capacity to promote inclusion in individual schools is particularly important. More knowledge, understanding and involvement among parents and the community is also critical, including engagement with cultural attitudes to disability, some of which will be inclusive, others not, and which also relate to political, social, faith and other aspects of a community/society.

4. Finance

Finance, particularly costs, are one of the least researched but potentially most contestable aspects of inclusion. It is likely, from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) experience, that there will be extra costs involved in enrolling disabled children (or indeed other ‘hard to reach’ and disadvantaged children still out of school). These should be identified and included in national education budgets. However, cost-effectiveness also needs to be considered, ranging from the benefits of improving teaching approaches through a focus on more inclusive schools to the developmental costs of failing to address the strong link between disability and poverty.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Education sector plans must ensure that the impact of inclusive approaches to education is monitored and evaluated, in relation not just to the education of disabled children, but to all children. Evaluation must also be seen as a critical aspect of scaling up innovation, including identifying key factors in success and future system and human capacity needs.

**The ‘disability responsiveness’ of education sector plans**

If these then are the critical issues for education sector plans to address in order to promote inclusive education for disabled children, how are governments, particularly those within the Commonwealth, currently faring? Using these issues as a starting point, World Vision recently undertook an analysis of 28 national education sector plans endorsed by the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI) between 2002 and 2006, of which seven belonged to Commonwealth countries.

1. Definitions and data

Nearly all country plans mentioned disability and inclusion, using a variety of terminologies, with ‘special educational needs’ being the most common. All lacked data on disabled children, both within and out of school. Where surveys were referred to, these were usually out of date and did not cover the full range of impairments. Although there was some acknowledgement in some plans of the paucity of data on disabled children, there were few indications as to how this would be addressed.

2. Policy and planning

Country plans varied in their policy coverage of disability and inclusion. Most mentioned disabled children (or special educational needs) as part of their strategy to achieve universal primary completion, some as part of their policies and strategies on disadvantaged and marginalised groups more generally, and most with some reference to international policy commitments (primarily EFA and MDG 2 rather than broader rights commitments). Over half were explicit in their general commitment to ‘inclusion’ though some described this as ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘integration’ and most also mentioned some special provision. However only some, including Ghana, Guyana, Kenya, Lesotho and Mozambique,

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**Box 3 Examples of transitional planning**

- setting up a screening and monitoring system, linked to EMIS;
- identifying service delivery structures at local level, such as a cluster of schools;
- developing support centres;
- developing more substantial teacher training;
- setting construction standards and a programme for improving existing school environments;
- developing partnership arrangements with non-state providers, including disabled people’s organisations.
presented specific policies, strategies and planning covering a range of issues such as data collection, target setting, access to school buildings, support centres and teacher training.

Very few countries had explicit objectives and targets related to inclusion, though Ghana had enrolment targets, Mozambique mentioned targets for children in regular schools, and Kenya’s plan committed to increasing enrolment of disabled children to 10 per cent Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) by 2010 and also had training and provision targets in relation to inclusion.

3. Service delivery and capacity development

Plans that detailed models of provision generally had a ‘two-track’ approach, namely maintaining some specialised provision while also trying to make regular education more inclusive. However, several plans (e.g., Ghana, Guyana, Mozambique) gave some detail on how they intended to enable regular schools to be more inclusive.

Plans gave very little description of system management in relation to provision for disabled children, though some countries (e.g., Ghana, Lesotho, Mozambique) referred to developing specialist resources and assessment centres. A few plans (e.g., Kenya) identified the importance of partnership with the non-government sector but there were very few references to working with communities to increase the participation of disabled children (although Guyana’s plan mentioned community sensitisation/awareness campaigns). There were also very few references to school management, such as the role of head teachers and the potential for developing more inclusive schools or school development planning. However, a number of plans did address capacity development, particularly of teachers, in order to prepare them for, and make their teaching more effective in relation to, the needs of disabled children.

Very limited attention was given in plans to cross-sector co-ordination and services for disabled children and their families even where responsibility is spread across ministries. However, some countries (e.g., Ghana) did identify more provision of early childhood care and education as a strategy for reaching disadvantaged groups.

4. Finance

Country plans contained little on financing projections and budgets on the additional unit costs involved in educating disabled children. Some did identify budget lines for special schools and other special provision but very few had developed financing mechanisms to foster the enrolment of disabled children and/or school funding to encourage and enable schools to be more inclusive. However, Kenya’s plan committed to extra payments in future to both regular and special schools to purchase books and materials for ‘children with special needs’.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring of student data, the development of provision, the effectiveness of training or the impact of other measures on the participation of disabled children was not usually discussed in any detail, if at all in country plans. Moreover, most did not explicitly address the scaling up of current innovative and inclusive practice in relation to disabled children.

Conclusion

Of the 28 national education sector plans reviewed, ten were considered to have strong or sound plans that at least made a policy commitment to disability and inclusion and had some targets and/or plans for key implementation issues. Of the seven plans reviewed from Commonwealth countries, six fell in this category. This represents a strong foundation from which Commonwealth countries can continue to make good on their commitments to education for disabled children. However, little will change in the lives of disabled children if these plans simply remain on paper. Planning for inclusion must be followed by action for inclusion. Only then will disabled children be able to actively participate in education alongside their peers.

Endnotes

1 This article is adapted from material in World Vision UK’s 2007 report Education’s Missing Millions. The full report is available at http://www.worldvision.org.uk/upload/pdf/Education%27s_Missing_Millions_-_Main_Report.pdf.
4 Taken from the preamble of the 2008 UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
7 Ibid., UNESCO (2006).
9 World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. To learn more, go to www.worldvision.org.uk.
10 These were: Albania, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guyana, Honduras, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Moldova, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Vietnam, Yemen.