



Inclusive education

Policy brief

At least 75 million primary-school-aged children around the world have never been to school. Most of these children aren't in school because they are poor, or because they are girls, have a disability or are from a minority ethnic group. More than half live in countries affected by conflict. Global efforts to get all children into school by 2015¹ will fail unless schools welcome and support the children who are missing out.

What's keeping children out of school?

In most cases children are out of school because the education system itself doesn't let them in. Mainstream education often fits educators' ideas of a 'standard' child, and children who don't fit that template aren't catered for. Discriminatory cultural attitudes, inaccessible schools, language barriers, lack of teacher training and a rigid curriculum are just some examples of what keeps children out of school. Lack of support for children affected by poverty, hunger or health issues excludes even more.

As well as condemning individual children to lifelong poverty, denying children an education prevents countries developing and makes societies less stable. Excluding the most socially and economically disadvantaged young people from school increases instability, conflict and social divisions. Excluding disabled children from school often means that parents or older siblings have to care for them and are therefore unable to work. Excluding girls from education has an impact on future generations, as children of educated mothers, on average, are healthier and less likely to die in childhood.²

What do we mean by inclusive education?

The thinking behind inclusive education originally focused on education for children with disabilities. Now inclusive education strategies address wider exclusion issues, such as gender and language, to improve learning for all children.

There is no single model for an inclusive school or education approach. Inclusive education ensures that the education system adapts to the child so that they can achieve their full potential, rather than expecting the child to adapt to the system. It often involves changing and modifying teaching methods, school management and education planning. It also requires education authorities to work with other sectors to tackle poverty, discrimination, health and hunger issues.

Existing commitments

International commitments to inclusive education already exist. They include the:

- 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states the right of every child to a free, basic education of quality³
- Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994, restated at the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000), which argues that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are “the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all”⁴
- 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which places an obligation on governments to ensure a fully inclusive education system for all children, and highlights the role of international cooperation to ensure governments meet their responsibilities.⁵

Current state of play

Although the number of primary children not in school has almost halved since the year 2000, the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education and the commitment of Education for All by 2015 will not be met while the most marginalised children continue to be left behind.

Increasingly, policy-makers, non-governmental organisations, educationalists and activists recognise that good quality education for all children can only be achieved through schools that welcome and accommodate all children without discrimination. Recent experience from developed countries bears this out. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries that have improved the quality of education, but have not invested in effective inclusion strategies, are seeing students from marginalised groups fall behind.⁶

Governments have the main responsibility for making education accessible and beneficial for all children. National education policies and systems are therefore a key target for reform. Several countries, such as India and Bangladesh, have expanded access to education for excluded groups in recent years, but dropout levels for these groups remain extremely high.⁷ A significant reason for this is that many governments lack clear strategies to make their education systems inclusive.

What we're calling for

Save the Children's experience illustrates a number of key elements that need to be in place to deliver inclusive education. We're urging national governments, donors and multilateral agencies to prioritise the following:

1. Equity-focused approaches to education monitoring, planning and financing

- A lack of data on the most marginalised children means that more investment in monitoring mechanisms is needed. For example, the Education Parity Index,⁸ which produces a combined assessment of disparities in education, could be more widely developed according to the national context.
- Inclusion needs to be part of basic education sector planning rather than a separate or secondary concern. Governments and donor agencies need to review education plans and implementation to ensure they prioritise and monitor disadvantaged groups.
- Including all children doesn't have to be expensive. There are many successful examples of inclusive practice in developing countries with limited resources. Costing models which bring quality education to the most excluded children should be used at local and national levels. It is also important to have flexible budget headings to meet a diverse range of local needs.

2. Investment in inclusive practice in the classroom and school

- Teachers can gain the skills they need to include a diverse range of children, if they receive support to examine attitudes and a good mix of information, practice opportunities and feedback. Training institutes and school leadership bodies should support such change. This means having clear policies, curricula and assessment frameworks which promote inclusive teaching.
- Promoting participatory 'whole school development' processes is essential, making sure that parents and children of excluded groups are included in education planning, management and resourcing.

3. International action

The international community must step up and affirm that inclusion in education can be realised, and recognise that achieving inclusive education is not about isolated initiatives or a one-off event. It is a dynamic, constantly evolving process.

International donors and multilateral agencies must:

- ensure that the development and annual review of national education policies effectively addresses issues of equity and inclusion
- champion inclusive, equitable education with partner governments, donor agencies, international financial institutions and multilaterals
- invest in capacity for planning, financing, practising and monitoring inclusive education

- support research initiatives to ensure that critical knowledge and evidence gaps in inclusive education are filled
- urge international systems for delivering the education Millennium Development Goals, such as the Education For All–Fast Track Initiative (EFA–FTI) Partnership, to prioritise inclusion and equity.

References

¹ At the UN Millennium Summit in 2000, world leaders agreed eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second MDG is to achieve universal primary education for all children by 2015. Education For All is a global movement led by UNESCO, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015

² Education Policy and Data Center (2007) *Window on the Future: 2025. Projections of education attainment and its impact*

³ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Articles 28 and 29

⁴ UNESCO (2005) *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all*

⁵ World Vision (2007) *Education's Missing Millions: Including disabled children in education through EFA FTI processes and national sector plans*

⁶ OECD (2007) *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First results from PISA 2006*

⁷ Save the Children (2006) www.savethechildren.net/alliance/media/newsdesk/2006-02-14.html

⁸ UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (2008), *Developing Rights-based Education SWAPs in South Asia: From evidence to action*, p 63