

Breakthroughs for children

Helping change world opinion on disabled children's right to go to school

In the 1990s Save the Children pioneered inclusive approaches to education. At the time many people thought it was impossible to teach disabled children alongside non-disabled children. Our pilot programmes were remarkably successful - in many countries disabled children went to school for the first time. And in the process we helped change world opinion on inclusive education.

Up to the mid-1990s the prevailing view on disabled children was that they couldn't be educated in mainstream schools. This was the official position of the United Nations and other international bodies. Disabled children in developing countries had very little chance of going to school - their governments didn't have the resources to create a separate system of special schools. The result? These children were isolated from their communities, at risk of neglect, and denied a future.

Save the Children was outraged by the neglect of disabled children. In the 1990s Save the Children became a leader in the field of inclusive education. In a number of countries we piloted programmes where disabled children were taught alongside their non-disabled peers. These programmes challenged traditional attitudes towards disabled children.

Many people felt it wasn't possible to teach disabled children alongside non-disabled children. We disagreed and found creative solutions to make inclusive education a reality. For example, we encouraged teachers to use simple classroom techniques, like making 3-D shapes out of paper to help a blind child learn geometry, or giving a child with learning difficulties an activity that is similar to what the rest of the class is doing, but suited to that child's abilities. The results of our inclusive education programmes were impressive, and not just for disabled children - all the children benefited. And it didn't cost a lot of money.

It didn't stop there. We were ambitious to achieve dramatic changes for disabled children on a large scale. The success of our approach helped pave the way for a shift by the international community towards inclusive education, consolidated in the so-called Salamanca Statement in 1994.

Throughout the 1990s, we worked closely with governments in Africa, Asia, South-Eastern Europe and the Middle East to pioneer policy and practice on inclusive education. Our programmes in China, Laos and Lesotho have been scaled up at provincial and national levels, allowing disabled children in those countries to go to school for the first time. These models have also been picked up and adapted by other countries. We continue to run inclusive education programmes in Mongolia, Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe, and use this experience to lobby governments in those countries.