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Disabilities and inclusion in early childhood care and education - helping all children to build strong foundations

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Leaving no child behind – the importance of inclusive early childhood education ›››

Disability does not respect race, ethnicity, gender, age, or religion. Approximately 150 million children globally have a disability (WHO, 2011) and UNICEF estimates that 90% of children with a disability living in low-income countries have never received any education (UNICEF, 2014a). In Uganda, estimates suggest that only 9% of children with disabilities are in primary school (UNICEF, 2014b). Children with disabilities are also more likely to drop out and not complete primary school, which helps explain why only about 6% progress to secondary school (UNICEF, 2014b). A strong educational foundation is critical to helping to change this situation and research clearly demonstrates the positive impact of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in improving learning and development for all pupils (Yoshikawa et al, 2013).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which Uganda is a signatory, recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. While no universally agreed definition of inclusive education exists, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) on inclusive education clearly expresses the general aim that "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs". Drawing from these internationally agreed basic frameworks, all Ugandan children similarly deserve the right to an education from their early years, and to learn to their full potential.

Beyond considerations of child rights there are many other compelling reasons to strengthen inclusion in ECCE. Research shows that inclusive education supports improved learning for pupils with disabilities (Falvey, 2004) without harming the education of those without disabilities (Kalambouka, Farrell, & Dyson, 2007). It is also clear that not improving inclusive education from the early years results in the need for more expensive interventions later in life and often a negative economic impact on society (Banks & Polack, 2014). Fortunately, even in resource-constrained environments there are low-cost measures that can be adopted to improve inclusive education.

Recognising different types of disabilities and the need for better early diagnosis ›››

In many contexts, better understanding of different types of disabilities and early, appropriate screening for and diagnosis of disabilities should be the starting point. Children who are blind, deaf or have severe physical disabilities that require a wheelchair are often readily identified. Those with milder physical disabilities or learning disabilities can be harder to spot and need different types of support to learn to their potential. Basic hearing and vision screenings are often used to identify children's most immediate impairments to learning, and in doing so, form a minimum starting point for further diagnosis of other special needs. While they are not as likely to be visually recognisable, it is important to acknowledge that many disabilities – including specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia – occur with significant frequency in school-age populations. Estimates cited in the World Report on Disability (2011) indicate that while only 2-3% of a population has a severe disability, as many as 15-18% in low income countries have a moderate impairment.

While all children should have the opportunity to access an education in the least restrictive environment, this basic right is not always easy to ensure for students with more severe disabilities who may require specialist support and equipment, especially in extremely low resource settings. Many students with more mild or moderate disabilities can and should be supported in inclusive teaching and learning settings alongside their typically developing peers, even where those settings are resource-constrained. Sometimes the most relevant support can be more related to teacher skills and practice than to the procurement of equipment, but it is important not to neglect these children with milder conditions when talking about disability and inclusion. If this is done, then awareness of the numbers affected by disabilities is likely to expand and the evidence for improved provision and increased resources becomes stronger.

Progress in Uganda ›››

Uganda already has in place a draft policy on Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2011) which intends to "mitigate factors that form barriers to children participation in learning". The vision of the policy is to ensure learners with special educational needs access quality education services equitably. More specifically, this policy aims to:

• Increase enrolment, participation and completion of schooling by people with special learning needs;
• Strengthen and systematise existing initiatives/programmes; and
• Enhance participation of stakeholders in management and implementation.

This draft policy, along with leadership from those in the Special Education Needs (SEN) Directorate at the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), helps to establish a supportive foundation for inclusive ECCE in Uganda. It is clear that additional resources are needed to enact the intent of the policy in full.

Within the draft policy, there is a recognition of the need for partnerships to deliver effective inclusive education. There already exist a number of effective partnerships operating and supporting effective inclusive education in certain locations across Uganda. Some of these efforts are described below and these partnerships are both an encouraging sign of progress to date, as well as an opportunity for greater future collaboration and improvement.

Challenges in Uganda ›››

While encouraging progress has been made, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that currently limit the quality and extent of inclusive early childhood education in Uganda. These include:

1. **Limited financial and other resources for inclusive education -** investment in activities that can support inclusion is limited, and the over-stretched system and large class sizes can pose additional challenges to inclusive education.

2. **Lack of specialist professionals -** particularly those focusing on early childhood teacher training, or specialised interventions such as speech or physical therapy, means that many teachers lack the skills and support to deliver high quality inclusive early childhood education.

3. **Attitudinal barriers at national, school and community levels -** can lead to viewing inclusive education as expensive or a task for later, after children without disabilities are receiving effective education. Stigma can further propel the non-education of most students with disabilities, or education merely in segregated or institutional settings for some.

While such challenges should not be used as an excuse for inaction they do present real and considerable barriers, and any proposed strategies to support inclusive education in ECCE must be made with an appreciation of this context.

The importance of referencing inclusion in ECCE policy ›

If inclusive education aims to support children with disabilities to learn effectively in early childhood it must be recognised in all relevant policy documents. It is not sufficient for it to be addressed in a separate policy on inclusive education. Inclusive education must be integrated into wider ECCE policies so that it is seen as a core and non-negotiable element of ECCE provision for all providers.

Without policy recognition real action is harder to justify, but once in policy the question instead becomes what realistic strategies can be developed to support policy implementation and bring about improved learning for pupils with disabilities in ECCE.

Strategies for improving inclusive ECCE within existing systems and resource constraints ›››

Research shows that access to early education is not sufficient for learning and that a focus on quality is critical. In fact, some studies show that poor quality provision can even have negative impacts on young children and that the most marginalised are most negatively affected by low quality provision (SCAA, 2012). The strategies outlined below are some ways that Uganda could help improve the access to, and quality of, inclusive education in early childhood. These strategies also focus on improving provision for children with mild or moderate disabilities as meaningful progress can be more readily realised for these without the need for large and expensive investments in equipment or infrastructure.

Strategy 1 – Improving early diagnosis of disabilities

Unless disabilities are effectively diagnosed then appropriate provision cannot be provided. Furthermore, research shows that interventions introduced early in a child's life produce stronger gains than those introduced later in life (Fernald, Kariger, Engle, & Raikes, 2009). Therefore, using the existing health system to support improved early diagnosis and intervention should be a priority where possible. Better diagnosis of a wider range of disabilities, including mild intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities, is likely to show a fuller picture of children affected and provide strong evidence for greater and more targeted resource allocation. Improved diagnosis should ideally be accompanied by better referral systems for children who have been identified as having additional support needs, so that they are supported throughout their development

Strategy 2 – Engaging people with disabilities

It is a frequent oversight that discussion about people with disabilities takes place without those people's voices present. Yet they have a crucial role to play. These voices should include pupils who can describe what helps them learn best, parents who can act as community ambassadors, and local people with disabilities who can act as role models to children, providing them with both support and inspiration. This can be encouraged informally or through the creation of peer groups to facilitate discussion and feedback.

Strategy 3 - Changing attitudes to improve access to ECCE for children with disabilities

Using existing community, school and government systems and processes, there is an opportunity to promote the value of inclusive education to parents and break attitudinal barriers to participation through better communications and dialogue. The first challenge is getting children with disabilities into ECCE centres and this must begin with local attitude change. As resources increase more sophisticated behaviour change communications could be considered, but much can be done with current resources such as:

- National and local promotion of positive imagery and beliefs about disability and inclusion, such as the #DrawDisability campaign led by the United Nations

- Highlighting local and national role models with disabilities including teachers with disabilities

- Communications focusing on examples of what people with disabilities can do, rather than what they can't do, to build respect among pupils, teachers and parents

- Recognising, rewarding (non-financially) and promoting ECCE centres or communities that make good progress on inclusive education

- Communications across Government departments and through sub-national structures on the value of educating people with disabilities on society and the economy.

- The use of transition classrooms such as the Play schemes developed by Disability Africa to help manage the transition from home to classroom and change attitudes towards capabilities

Strategy 4 - Embedding inclusive education into all aspects of early childhood teacher training programmes

Children with mild to moderate disabilities – including those impairments that are not visually identifiable – are likely to be present in large numbers of classrooms throughout Uganda, whether teachers are aware of this or not. There is a need to support all early childhood educators with resources and training that enable them to see themselves as being able to teach children with special educational needs. To support this in a cost-effective way, building skills to improve inclusive practice needs to be integrated into existing pre-service and in-service training for early childhood educators.

Options for pre-service training	Options for in-service training
Integration of inclusive pedagogy in all course areas, not just a separate 'inclusion and disability' unit	School-based models where ALL teachers are encouraged to reflect on and improve inclusive practice using real examples
Prioritisation of simple age-appropriate classroom techniques and home-made teaching aids aimed to improve learning of children with high frequency disabilities as an initial target	A focus on simple age-appropriate classroom techniques and home-made teaching aids aimed to improve learning of children with high frequency disabilities as an initial target
Introduction to the importance of a multi-sensory approach in classrooms and how to deliver it	Ensuring school leaders are equipped to champion access to services and effective networking
Training on specific and practical strategies such as universal design for learning (UDL), preferential seating, individual/pair/groupwork and buddying	Linking teachers to a network of other available local resources to introduce new ideas and techniques as well as occasional specialist input
Ensuring new teachers know what services exist and are available to support them and their pupils when they start teaching in ECCE centres	Using 'key teachers' to lead centre-based sessions and WhatsApp or other social media to create virtual learning networks between schools

Strategy 5 – Consider inclusive education when developing early childhood teaching and learning materials

As new materials are developed, by state and non-state actors, for ECCE in Uganda there should be a requirement to consider how they can be developed to facilitate quality inclusive education. If done early on in development this process can be simple and cost-effective with minimal specialist input. It requires a review of factors linked to inclusion and general best practice such as text, font, spacing, colour use, as well as ensuring the language and imagery used provides a positive depiction of children with disabilities and their role in society. Once inclusive materials are produced, pre-service and in-service training can help support teachers by showing them how to use such materials and also how to create and use home-made teaching aids that take into account the same factors.

Strategy 6 – Integrate inclusive education into existing District and School Management approaches

Treating the education of children with disabilities as a separate issue requiring discrete systems and management is not only poorly aligned with contemporary attitudes on inclusion, but it can also be time consuming and costly. Integrating an inclusive education focus into existing systems can be a more efficient and cost-effective approach, for example:

- the inclusion of disability in early childhood data collection in each ECCE centre,

- requiring inclusive education actions to be integrated into centre development plans and Centre Management Committee meetings, and

- ensuring inclusion activities are incorporated in local government budgeting, planning and performance monitoring.

Strategy 7 – Mobilise community and parent resources

Engaging parents and communities as ambassadors for inclusive education not only helps change attitudes and increase access, but can also improve the quality of provision through support in the classroom. Research has shown that parental engagement and partnership in special education can positively affect learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Stoner et al, 2005). This can be done through existing school structures or through networks such as Parent Support Groups and Child Rights Clubs developed by Uganda Society for Disabled Children and operating in 18 districts. With a limited amount of guidance, motivated parents or community members could help by:

Strategy 8 – Use partnership approaches to maximise the impact of existing knowledge and practices about inclusive early childhood education

As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are several NGOs, donor-funded projects and local institutions in Uganda working on early childhood education and inclusive practice (see Box). There is a great potential for central government to leverage these resources for more widespread support of inclusive early childhood education, such as the expansion of support provided by Cheshire Services Uganda to ECCE centres. The Ugandan government can support regular dissemination of best practice across institutions, encouraging or hosting roundtables or working groups and laying down the challenge to these institutions to support Government to improve inclusive early childhood education. This could also include working with specialist providers, e.g. Perkins School for the Blind, to expand provision for those with specific disabilities.

- Supporting a teacher by giving additional support to pupils with disabilities;

- Speaking to students, asking them and observing what helps them and what doesn't and feeding this back to the teachers;

- Encouraging other parents to seek early identification of possible disabilities and assisting them in obtaining and providing support for their children with disabilities at home.

Box 1: Examples of partnerships to further explore in Uganda

- Uganda Society for Disabled Children's Parent Support Groups
- Perkins International and Light for the World
- Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE)
- Child to Child/AbleChild Africa's use of children as change agents to engage disabled peers
- Cheshire Services Uganda's approach to support children with disabilities back to school through inclusive education

Strategies for improving inclusive learning with additional investment ›››

If inclusive early childhood education were to receive greater focus and some additional investment there are a number of worthwhile actions that could be considered, in addition to the above strategies. These are listed here briefly in case such investment becomes possible, though current constraints on the Ugandan early childhood education system make it unlikely that such interventions are immediately viable.

Specialised professional development

Beyond the integration of inclusion into existing pre- and in-service systems as described above, additional resources could include the development and widespread delivery of specialised inclusive education courses for all early childhood educators. Another option would see an expansion of the use of certified disability and inclusion specialists who visit schools to troubleshoot or support classroom improvement.

Improved resources and facilities

This paper has emphasised that many children with mild to moderate disabilities do not require new and expensive resources to facilitate their inclusion in ECCE, yet many children do require additional supports. These specialised (and notably higher-cost) supports may include braille and large print texts, or sign language interpreters, assistive technology, assistant teachers or dedicated special educators, or mobility resources such as wheelchairs or walkers. It is not recommended that such expensive procurement be a priority, or a generic ECCE centre requirement, but that resources are spent when a specific need can be met with a solution that will enhance the learning opportunities for an individual child in a specific context. Furthermore, new ECCE construction should consider reasonable accessibility features such as ramps, the height of door handles, flat floors and accessible latrines/toilets. Many of these considerations can be included into new builds without adding significant cost. Adaptations to existing buildings should focus on current need and available funds. Additional funds can often be raised by community members or specific organisations when requests are linked to an individual pupil and an individual assessment of need.

Inclusive and disability-responsive education systems

To ensure sustainability and systemic change, it is necessary to improve the knowledge of inclusive education of government officials at all levels and help them to understanding how to improve performance. This would mean that when decisions are to be made on resource allocation, curriculum revision, subsidy provision or data systems, an inclusive education lens is effectively applied.

Conclusion ›››

For national approaches to early childhood education to be effective for children with disabilities inclusive early childhood education needs to be addressed in core ECCE policies. There is not just a moral incentive but it is also linked to extensive economic and societal benefit for Uganda. Resources for inclusive education in Uganda are limited; however, the rights of young children with disabilities cannot be ignored and progress is certainly achievable. Not being able to do everything immediately, does not mean doing nothing at all. In particular, progress on support to children with mild or moderate high frequency disabilities can be made within existing systems and using available resources.

The strategies highlighted in this paper are practical and achievable in the Ugandan context. If linked to relevant policies and implemented with effective leadership and accountability, they could lead to significant improvements in the provision of quality inclusive early childhood education for the children of Uganda, and thus ultimately enhance the education system as a whole.

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A Set of ECCE Topics for Consideration in Uganda

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