



Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: The Early Childhood Imperative

Introduction

Worldwide, there are about 650 million persons with disabilities. This accounts for 10% of the global population, and constitutes more than 20% of the world's poorest people. Children with disabilities experience stigma from birth and are more prone to exclusion, concealment, abandonment, institutionalization and abuse. Mortality rates among children with disabilities are 80% even in countries where under-five mortality has declined below 20%.¹ Strikingly, 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.

A remarkable step toward recognizing people with disabilities as equal and active members of society has been made through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which came into force in May 2008. The CRPD calls for enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by children and adults with disabilities, and points to the importance of early intervention as well as inclusion in the education system from an early age. This policy brief argues that early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a powerful means of nurturing diverse abilities and overcoming disadvantages and inequalities, and discusses main approaches to responding to developmental needs of young children with disabilities.

Why is ECCE important for children with disabilities?

The early years offer a special opportunity to foster developmental gains in children as 80% of the brain's capacity develops before the age of three. The gains are shown to be highest for those with maximum disadvantage. Equally, early neglect has lasting disabling effects. Poor nutrition leads to early childhood stunting, and coupled with low stimulation, it contributes to the poor cognitive and educational performance of over 200 million under-five children who are 'not fulfilling their developmental potential'.²

Comprehensive ECCE providing care, stimulation, parental support and access to relevant services enhances the effects of interventions for children with disabilities. Positive transition from home to preschool is encouraged when the early childhood programme allows for child-centred pedagogy and necessary individualised support to effectively address the diverse learning needs and abilities of children with disabilities.³ Indeed, early childhood programmes that are responsive to individual needs and

respectful of diversity benefit all children and contribute to building the foundations of an inclusive society.⁴

For ECCE to deliver these benefits and 'be effective, accessible and equitable, a society must invest in it'.⁵ Key policy measures include investment in early assessment and intervention, universalizing access to early education and promoting inclusive, community based educational provision with reliable specialist support.

How can ECCE be more responsive to children with disabilities?

Early Assessment and Intervention

Initiated well before children become eligible for preschools and schools, early assessment and intervention should be made available to identify and support young children 'at risk'. It is most effective when families are closely involved in the process, enabling them to seek appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic services to support their child's well-being and development. Through early assessment coupled with intervention, families gain relevant information, especially about what their child can do and about interventions that will optimize his/her learning potential. This also increases the chances that children with disabilities can participate and flourish in inclusive mainstream educational settings. Evidence suggests that one in three infants and toddlers who receive early intervention services do not present later with a disability or require special education in a preschool.⁶

While OECD countries offer several long-standing examples,⁷ Belarus has recently initiated an Early Childhood Intervention programme. Implemented through eight Development Centres equipped with a full complement of specialists, it provides individualized, child-centred, family focused and integrated health, nutrition and developmental services. Parenting education is provided as an integral part of the programme and supports the needs of parents of children with disabilities. Children are supported with regular assessments, child and family development plans, careful tracking and follow-up.⁸ In Vietnam, successful early intervention has encouraged full inclusion of children with disabilities in its school system.⁹

⁴ World Vision Armenia focus group discussions with teachers, specialists and parents, February 2009.

⁵ Penn, H. 2004. CHIP Report 8, CHIP, London.

⁶ Hebbeler, K. et al., cited in Jones, L. 2009. Making Hope a Reality. ZERO TO THREE Policy Center.

⁷ Brambring, M., Rauh, H. & Beelmann, A. (eds). 1996. Early Childhood Intervention: Theory, Evaluation, and Practice. Walter de Gruyter.

⁸ Vargas-Baron & Janson. 2008. Early Childhood Intervention, Special Education and Inclusion: A Focus on Belarus. UNICEF.

⁹ Hodes, M. 2007. Early intervention in Vietnam, in Down Syndrome Research and Practice, v12 n1 p38-41 July 2007.

¹ Thomas P. 2005. Disability, Poverty and the MDGs. DFID.

² Grantham-McGregor, S. et al. 2007. 'Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries', In Lancet 2007; 369.

³ ISSA. 2006. Documenting Educational Reform: the Step by Step Case Study project. Open Society Institute & Soros Foundations Network.

Universal Access to Early Education

Besides a holistic attention to the earliest years of life, it is critically important for children with disabilities to access formal pre-primary education. Yet, only 56% of all young children worldwide have access to any form of pre-primary services. Although data regarding access for children with disabilities is lacking globally, they are least likely to be included in such programmes. Out of 100 million children with disabilities (age five and under) worldwide, 80% live in developing countries,¹⁰ where the provision of pre-primary education and other basic services tends to be insufficient.¹¹

Recently, national governments have begun to recognize the power of ECCE to develop equitable educational provision for all children. Ghana, Gambia and Kenya plan to develop ECCE for poor, remote and disadvantaged children. Cambodia has gone a step further by including ECCE in its National Plan for achieving universal basic education by 2015 with disability and gender as cross-cutting themes. Even more encouraging is Lesotho's plan (2005-2015) which has made provision for special educational needs in mainstream early education as part of the effort to enhance access for disadvantaged groups.¹² Donors must support similar national commitments by incorporating provision for young children with disabilities in the recent agreements to expand the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Partnership. Comprehensive, inclusive ECCE must be factored into the FTI appraisal guidelines and the indicative framework as well as the new 'Equity and Inclusion in Education' tool, designed to support strategic and economic planning for inclusion.¹³

Inclusive Education Approaches

Although the notion of 'disabilities' entails varied conditions, abilities, difficulties and needs, there is limited consensus on viable means of addressing this diversity in educational provision. Mainstream educational systems typically address a narrow band of learning needs and do not reflect the diversity of abilities, interests and language that all pupils bring to the classroom. When pupils with disabilities receive education, it is often in segregated classes or schools where valuable physical, medical, behavioural and pedagogical support can be provided. However, underlying notions of 'individual deficit' and persistent discriminatory attitudes often limit their curricular options and perpetuate large scale institutionalization, failing to offer equal and meaningful education to children with disabilities and exacerbating their isolation in society.

The inability of mainstream education systems to recognize and respond to diverse learning needs is the real

barrier to learning. To be inclusive, educational systems must offer differentiation, accommodations and modifications within the general curriculum and include early training in orientation, mobility skills and alternative communication.¹⁴ As shown in the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) experiences, family involvement is critical in promoting inclusion of children with all types and degrees of impairment and in generating low-cost, lasting solutions. In inner city slums of Mumbai, India, community-based nurseries were set up for 6000 families living in extreme poverty. The nurseries enrolled all children aged 3-6 with disabilities with non-disabled children. They were staffed with locally recruited and trained high school graduates, and received support from special education specialists. This approach demonstrated real gains in the children's developmental scores, and enabled more than 1000 children with disabilities to move into inclusive classrooms in state schools.¹⁵ More should be done to engage parents, communities and people with disabilities in policymaking and practice for inclusion.

Conclusion

The Early Childhood imperative for the rights of children with disabilities is clear. With almost universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the growing adoption of the CRPD, duty bearers at all levels must be held accountable to ensure that all girls and boys with disabilities have access to life-long learning. If the Millennium Development Goals around universal primary education and eradication of poverty are to be met, EFA initiatives must urgently address the inclusion of children with disabilities from the early years, as they comprise one third of the 77 million out of school children.¹⁶ The 2008 UNESCO International Conference on Education sent a strong message to the international community, calling for greater investment in early assessment and intervention, inclusive ECCE programmes, and for equipping teachers with appropriate skills and materials to teach diverse student populations. In essence, promotion of comprehensive, inclusive ECCE must become a priority for global development.

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¹⁰ Interpretation of statistical data from UN Enable.

¹¹ The gross enrolments in ECCE were: 10% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 22% in the Arab states, 31% in Central Asia, 36% in South and West Asia, 49% in East Asia, 49% in transitional countries and 59% in Latin America. UNESCO, 2006. EFA Global Monitoring Report.

¹² Education's Missing Millions - including disabled children in education through EFA FTI processes and national sector plans. World Vision UK, 2007.

¹³ The tool is currently being piloted in Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho and Malawi.

¹⁴ Save the Children. 2009. See Me Hear Me: a guide to using the UN CRPD.

¹⁵ Spastic Society of India, cited by Alur, 2007, in Barton & Armstrong (eds) Policy Experience and Change: Cross Cultural Reflections on Inclusive Education. Springer.

¹⁶ UNESCO, 2006. EFA Global Monitoring Report.