Inclusive Futures
Promoting disability inclusion

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 19

Query title	**Primary education for children with disabilities: learning from implementation in Syria**
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Query	This query is a short summary of information gathered from interviews with implementers working on education for children with disabilities in Syria.
Enquirer	**DFID Syria**

Defining disability and inclusive education

DFID follows the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in promoting a **human rights approach** to disability. **Persons with disabilities are:**

> '…*those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*.' (Article 1, CRPD)

This concept of disability moves away from the traditional individual, medical-based perspective characterised by a focus on physical deficits (impairments), to one that encompasses the **attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers** that limit or exclude people with impairments from participation. In this way, disability is best understood in terms of:

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Impairment + Barriers = Disability

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This means disabled children and adults have the right to participate in all activities as active members of their communities, which may need to be adapted for accessibility and inclusion. This implies that different social agents take responsibility for understanding what barriers may exist for disabled children and adults and take steps to mitigate them. The emphasis for inclusion is placed on reducing barriers and promoting opportunities for participation, rather than expecting disabled children and adults to 'fit in' as best they can.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education, including to primary, secondary and tertiary education, requiring state parties to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded on the basis of disability and that all persons with disabilities 'can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live' (Article 24, CRPD).

It is important to highlight that inclusive education:

- includes, but is not limited to, disability-inclusive education;
- focuses on participation and achievement in education, as well as basic presence in / access to an education setting;
- focuses on addressing a range of barriers to inclusion, beyond infrastructure/environment barriers (such as policy, practice, attitude and resource barriers);
- is not limited to formal school settings;
- involves changes at different levels, including system-level changes and supporting individual learners' needs;

- is an evolving process involving shaping education to ensure it is child-friendly and inclusive for a wide range of children and learners.[1]

Education and the Syrian crisis

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, 23 million people have been displaced. Over two million Syrian children are out of school and a further 1.3 million are at risk of dropping out. Children have high rates of psychological distress in Syria, with a recent Save the Children survey with 313 parents, caregivers and adolescents aged 13-17 in seven Syrian governates reporting 89% children's behaviour has become more fearful and nervous as the war goes on.[2] This translates to high demand for specialised psychosocial interventions in classrooms, with UNICEF estimating that one in eight children requires support.[3]

Conflict and instability are widely recognised to disproportionately affect people with disabilities, including in education, whilst conflict also leads to an increase in the prevalence of disability. According to a recent report by Syria Relief, an estimated 10,000 children with disabilities have no access to basic necessities, facing considerable challenges in accessing health care, education and rehabilitation services.[4]

Before the outbreak of the conflict, there was increasing recognition of the poor education outcomes for children with disabilities in Syria. A joint national "committee for inclusion", with members from several governmental bodies and non-governmental organisations, was established under the umbrella of the Government of Syria Ministry of Education in 2000. In 2008-2009, inclusion policies were put in place ensuring that children with disabilities were not excluded from educational opportunities on the basis of their disability. This included the development of Ministry of Education standards on inclusive education, although it is not clear to what extent these were implemented.

Query methodology

This query was conducted in 5.5 combined days of researcher and expert time. It involved conducting interviews with education practitioners *inside* Syria and gathering learning on how education projects are currently supporting children with disabilities. The key areas of investigation were the following:

- teacher/teaching practices (what teachers do in the classroom/school, covering things like their overall approach to pedagogy; lesson planning and differentiation; individual education plans, etc.);
- resource rooms;
- community-based interventions to remove barriers to inclusion.

Some key published literature was also reviewed, however evidence in the public sphere on education projects implemented inside Syria is very limited. Interviews were therefore the focus of the query.

Key findings

Education actors in Syria are working in multiple ways to improve access and learning for children with disabilities, including through early childhood and primary education interventions. Key interventions highlighted in the interviews include changes to physical school infrastructure, teacher training, training of

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[1] Definition of inclusive education, EENET website: https://www.eenet.org.uk/what-is-inclusive-education/defining-inclusive-education/

[2] McDonald, A., Buswell, M., Khush, S., and Brophy M. (2017), *Invisible wounds: the impact of six years of war on the mental health of Syria's children*, Save the Children. Available at:
https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/emergency-humanitarian-response/invisible-wounds.pdf

[3] UNICEF (2019) *Fast Facts: Syria Crisis 2019.* https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/5426/file/SYR-FactSheet-August2019.pdf.pdf

[4] UNICEF (2019) *Fast Facts: Syria Crisis 2019.* https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/5426/file/SYR-FactSheet-August2019.pdf.pdf

other actors including civil society organisations (CSOs), the provision and strengthening of resource rooms[5]. Additional activities involved work to address stigma, skill-building amongst learners, the provision of psychosocial support and rehabilitation. Interviews highlighted a number of factors which led to projects working well, as well as some key challenges and lessons learned.

What works well:

- **Adopting a holistic, collaborative and systems-strengthening approach** including activities at the school, sub-district, and district levels, adopting a progressive vision for inclusive education. Strong links with and support with key decision makers and authority figures and building on existing policies and practices are critical for project success. Links with others, including civil society and the media are also important, including to create networks and provide platforms for knowledge exchange.
- Addressing **barriers at the environmental, attitudinal and institutional levels**, ie. moving beyond physical infrastructure to address negative attitudes and stigma, including amongst education actors and communities.
- **Community-based initiatives including working with communities, parents and families, and the media.** Encouraging volunteering and providing parent-to-parent support, community-based investigation/problem-solving, and local (self) advocacy. Supporting parents and children by focusing on transition, including links between kindergartens and primary schools also works well.
- **Supporting teachers to shift their teaching practice** through training on inclusive pedagogy. It is important that approaches to improving teaching include not only one-off trainings but additional support through access to ongoing support and mentoring.
- **Make use of specialist inputs** (special education centres, resource rooms, etc), ensuring their roles are clearly framed as supporting inclusion and not perpetuating segregation or superficial integration.
- **Ensuring good links between specialists, mainstream school teachers, parents and children in the development and implementation of individual education plans (IEPs).**

Challenges and lessons learned include:

- The **onset of the conflict and rapidly changing political and humanitarian context** in some areas, including the cessation of services and the focus on humanitarian relief, has meant it has been challenging to keep inclusive education a priority.
- Inclusive education involves systemic change and often takes years; **short-term funding** is therefore a challenge.
- **Information flows between education actors in and outside Syria are limited**. Implementers inside Syria are looking for advice and support, however barriers to communication and movement are currently hampering this.
- **Limited human resources**, both in terms of specialists and mainstream teachers with adequate knowledge and skills, affects projects aiming to support children with disabilities in education.
- A **limited understanding of inclusive education** amongst some education actors, particularly in relation to inclusion for all learners and the importance of attitudinal and institutional barriers.
- **Limited collaboration** between stakeholders such as government, CSOs and communities.

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[5] Sometimes referred to as special units, resource rooms are attached to mainstream schools and provide specialist advice on support for children with disabilities. Their implementation varies and they can often become special schools in their own right rather than facilitating the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. For further info see HEART, 2019: https://www.heart-resources.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Inclusive-Learning-Topic-Guide.pdf

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