

Research to Practice Paper:

**Inclusive Education and the Global Development Agenda:
Promoting Social Connectedness for Children with
Disabilities**

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Lessons of Community and Compassion:
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through
Policy and Program Development

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The United Nations' Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG) and UNESCO's Education For All (EFA) initiative both put forth the global goal of increasing access to basic, quality education for all children. The international commitment to achieve MDG 2 and EFA has been successful on the surface. According to the 2015 Millennium Development Goals Report, primary school net enrollment rate in the developing world has increased 8 points since 2000, reaching 91 percent, and the number of out of school children worldwide has fallen by nearly half to an estimated 57 million.¹ These macro-statistics present a rhetoric that enrollment increases in safe, quality schools have impacted a wide range of children. However, this is not the case. While the international community must be applauded for its accomplishments over the past three decades regarding access to education, smaller cohorts within the global data still face obstacles in accessing education. Amongst those who have not reaped the benefits of international efforts to increase access to education are children with intellectual and physical disabilities.

In large scale global data, such as the MDGs and the EFA plan, the overall positive statistics supersede the smaller, often not as successful evidence. The case of access to quality schools for children with disabilities falls under the latter of the statistical analysis. According to a 2011 UNICEF report on the rights of children

¹ Inter-Agency and Expert Group on MDG Indicators, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (New York: United Nations, 2016), 4, [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf).

with disabilities, "children with disabilities have remained relatively invisible in the efforts to achieve universal access to primary education."² For example, 2011 household data from four southern African states demonstrate that children with disabilities were two to three times less likely to attend school than children without a disability.³ Current global initiatives have neglected to examine concrete national and community solutions that would aide children with disabilities to access schooling. In order to rectify the neglect of children with disabilities, targeted measures to help these students overcome barriers and inclusive education systems must be explored.

In response to the failures of international, national and local communities to address the educational needs of children with disabilities, initiatives must be put in place to include these children in the promotion of the right to education. This paper will examine the growing phenomenon of inclusive education, which not only attempts to ensure that children with disabilities access quality education, but dismantles the often forgotten, yet pervasive problem of social isolation. In order to ensure that children with disabilities attend schools where they are seen as equally important members of society, national and local governing bodies must implement policies where these children, beginning in pre-school, are included in

² United Nations Children's Fund, *The Right of Children with Disabilities to Education: A Rights-Based Approach to Inclusive Education in the CEECIS Region* (Geneva: UNICEF, 2011), 4, [https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Background_NoteFINAL\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Background_NoteFINAL(1).pdf).

³ World Health Organization, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva: WHO, 2011), 207, http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/chapter7.pdf.

the education system. It is only by building inclusive schools that communities can become inclusive, allowing all people to connect, promoting compassion and viewing each other for their positive contributions to the community.

Social Isolation, Inclusive Schools and Children with Disabilities

The 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement led to the inception of inclusive education as a part of the global development agenda. The Salamanca Statement reaffirmed the goals of the 1990 EFA program, but specifically focused on how to best include children with disabilities.⁴ The Statement proclaims that "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs."⁵ The Salamanca Statement was the first global initiative to specifically target children with disabilities and schooling. UNESCO statistics regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities are inadequate, demonstrating a lack of responsibility by the international community as a whole to promote and monitor inclusive education. A global refocus on inclusive education occurred in 2008 with the development of the UN's Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Article 24 of the CRPD focuses on education, and, in similar fashion to

⁴ See Secretariat of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs* (Paris: UNESCO, 1990), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001275/127583e.pdf>

⁵ World Conference on Special Needs Education and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), viii, http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

the Salamanca Statement, states that signatories must ensure that "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."⁶ Inclusive education as a tool to deepen social connectedness and promote social and economic opportunities for children with disabilities has been a part of the global development agenda for the past three decades, yet is often forgotten when examining education rights.

UNESCO defines inclusive education as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education."⁷ The process of including children with disabilities in a classroom has two primary benefits for these children: improved academic achievement and improved social connections with their peers. Gary Bunch, professor of critical disability studies at York University, provides a basic, yet important conclusion about the effects of inclusive education. Bunch states that "students experiencing disabilities do better academically and socially when educated with their typical peers, and less well when educated in segregated settings."⁸ Specific to social isolation, inclusion in the education system breaks down barriers that students with

⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (New York: UN, 2008), <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>.

⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, *The Right*, 4.

⁸ Gary Bunch, "Disability and Student Well-Being Impact of Inclusion Education," Ontario Independent Facilitation Network, last modified January 23, 2015, <http://www.oifn.ca/disability-and-student-well-being/>.

disabilities face in their desire and need for connections as equals. The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2011 World Report on Disability states that "inclusive education is better able to reach the majority and avoids isolating children with disabilities."⁹ To dismantle the crippling effects that social isolation has on children with disabilities, the international community must promote the creation of comprehensive, inclusive education systems to national and local governments.

The case studies below will examine the impacts, both positive and negative, that education can have on children with disabilities. Each will be broken down into three themes: non-inclusive education and its impact, inclusive education systems that need reforms, and a successful, inclusive school that creates social connectedness.

Case Studies

Although inclusive education has been a goal of the global development agenda, there are countries that have not created inclusive schools and more that have even restricted access to education for children with disabilities. Serbia, a country that is a candidate for membership in the European Union, demonstrates a disturbing case of an illegal, non-inclusive education system, which purposefully

⁹ World Health Organization, *World Report*, 226.

isolates children with disabilities. In 2016, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published the report, *'It is My Dream to Leave This Place': Children with Disabilities in Serbian Institutions*, which explores the coerced placement of children with disabilities into state-run institutions. In short, the placement of children with disabilities in these underfunded, understaffed and unloving institutions had led to "children's stunted physical, emotional and intellectual development."¹⁰ While the lack of basic child services has been detrimental to children's health, the government has also segregated, separated or prohibited children with disabilities from attending school. HRW research found that approximately 50 percent of children with disabilities are not even enrolled in a school, and that the majority of children with disabilities that did attend school did so in segregated "special classrooms."¹¹ The forced segregation of children with disabilities in school has ensured that these children remain isolated and ultimately shunned from society at large. Although Serbia is a signatory to the CRPD, and whose own education laws enforce inclusive schools to promote achievement and social connections, the government's actions have created wards of social isolation for children with disabilities. While Serbia is a disturbing case study regarding the lack of inclusive education and its consequences for children with disabilities, it is not the only country to reject inclusive education.

¹⁰ Emina Cerimovic, *'It is My Dream to Leave This Place': Children with Disabilities in Serbian Institutions* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2016), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

Implementing inclusive education systems and classroom plans will not suddenly reverse the trend of social isolation that plagues children with disabilities. Inclusive education is definitely the most important first step in combatting social isolation, but to truly ensure that children with disabilities connect and achieve in their communities, inclusive systems must be implemented properly and thoughtfully. A case study of inclusive education in the Netherlands, a global leader in progressive education, demonstrates the difficulty of ensuring social connectedness for students with disabilities. The authors of the study state that "including students with special needs does not automatically lead to an increase of friendships."¹² The study included 180 classes in 119 different primary schools in the Netherlands, in which there were 234 children with disabilities. The study concludes that in terms of friendships, interactions and acceptance by classmates, students with disabilities engage less in social participation in the classroom and continue to feel isolated even within an inclusive school.¹³ This study, along with others which provide similar results, prove that implementing an inclusive education system in a vacuum will not change the social opportunities of children with disabilities.¹⁴ Other factors must be taken into account that work alongside the

¹² Marloes Koster et al., "Social Participation of Students with Special Needs in Regular Primary Education in the Netherlands," *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 57, no. 1 (March 2010): 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ See Buysse, Virginia, Barbara Davis Goldman, and Martie L. Skinner. "Setting Effects on Friendship Formation among Young Children with and without Disabilities." *Exceptional Children* 68 (July 2012): 503-17, and Guralnick, Michael J., Brian Neville, Mary A. Hammond, and Robert T. Connor. "The Friendships of Young Children with Developmental Delays: A Longitudinal Analysis." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 1 (January 2007): 64-79.

inclusive setting to actually improve the standing of students with disabilities. These factors will be explored further in the recommendations section below.

The final case to be explored concerns one inclusive school that has succeeded in raising achievement and social connectedness for students with disabilities in the classroom. While the sample size for this study is small, the goal was to find specific initiatives that worked well for students with disabilities in an inclusive setting. The examined school was Creekside Elementary School (CES) in Florida, which enrolls 480 students and closely mirrors socio-economic demographic averages of the state. CES was chosen particularly because it changed from a school performing slightly above district and state averages concerning inclusivity in 2005, to, as the Florida Department of Education defines, a completely inclusive school in 2009.¹⁵ CES's development from a school with separate classrooms for students with disabilities to an inclusive school corresponded to increases in academic achievement for both students with and without disabilities, and in sentiments of inclusion for children with disabilities. The school's transformation into a "highly effective, inclusive elementary school" did not occur simply by putting all students, regardless of ability or disability, into the same classroom. The study demonstrates several fundamental initiatives that the school and the community established in order to ensure increased achievement

¹⁵ James McLeskey, Nancy L. Waldron, and Lacy Redd, "A Case Study of a Highly Effective, Inclusive Elementary School," *The Journal of Special Education* 48, no. 1 (2014): 61.

and connectedness. Teachers accepted and learned methods to best educate students with disabilities as part of their typical classroom activities. Improved tracking systems were put into place by teachers and administrators to measure both achievement and social opportunities, and additional resources for students with disabilities were used efficiently and effectively.¹⁶ Although the CES study examines one school, the methods, initiatives and effort put forth by the school to create a successful inclusive school for all students can be used as criteria in the development of inclusive education systems.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Inclusive schools are an important first step in defeating the devastating effects of social isolation on children with disabilities worldwide. By promoting inclusive education as well as acceptance, not just tolerance, of people with disabilities at a young age, communities can develop in a way that allows all people to feel connected and respected. However, as is the case in the majority of development studies and development initiatives, there is not an easy, conclusive way to fix this problem. There needs to be multi-step approaches to combat social isolation in schools for children with disabilities. This paper will recommend

¹⁶ Ibid., 59-60.

several philosophical and political initiatives that can be taken in the future in order to increase inclusivity in schools.

1. Bottom-Up Approach

The MDGs, and the UN's current primary development agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), have attempted to expand the worldwide access and quality of primary and secondary education. As stated above, the general statistics demonstrate an increase in both of these measurements in the past two decades, an improvement that has helped the economic and social statuses of millions of children. However, while the MDG progress report does address vulnerable groups like girls and Indigenous children, it does not go far enough in examining children with disabilities and their plight in terms of accessing quality education. Leading international organizations, especially UNICEF and UNESCO, should not only imply that inclusive education is good for society, they must attempt to create meaningful changes. To do so, this paper recommends that international organizations focus primarily on community initiatives that engage local communities, schools and education systems to create inclusive educational spaces. This recommendation will take many forms depending on the community and the severity of the problem. For instance, HRW successfully made local governments, as well as the national government in Serbia, aware of their mistakes,

and has worked individually with institutions to send children with disabilities to schools.¹⁷ It is only by working with local institutions that international organizations can promote inclusive education as a developer of increased social connections and of community building.

2. Teacher Training and Buy-In

The most important recommendation concerns the ability of teachers. While including children with disabilities in the classroom is the first step, achievement and connectedness outcomes will not be possible unless the teacher is equipped to work with children who have a disability and they believe in the ideals of inclusive education. The two case studies on inclusive schools demonstrate the need for properly trained teachers. In the Netherlands, teachers interacted with children with disabilities in the classroom, but were not necessarily successful in ensuring all children interacted and connected.¹⁸ However, at CES, more than half of the teachers received graduate training in a field pertinent to classroom education, which surely made them more aware of the need for children with disabilities to interact with other students.¹⁹ Teachers are the most important actors in ensuring that classrooms truly become inclusive and respectful. Teachers should "be able to make accurate assessments of students' social participation, in order to notice

¹⁷ Cerimovic, *"It is My Dream*, 67-68.

¹⁸ Koster et al., "Social Participation," 65.

¹⁹ McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd, "A Case," 60.

problems in a timely manner," and adjust the classroom climate accordingly to ensure that children with disabilities are included and connecting with their peers.²⁰

This paper recommends that additional teacher workshops and teacher college courses be offered regarding inclusive classroom management and diverse learning needs. While this may not be as feasible for countries that have a shortage of teachers and/or a shortage of funds for teacher training, some improvement must be made if the ideals of inclusive education become local realities.

3. Inclusive Pre-School Education

While most studies examining inclusive education occur in primary and secondary schools, inclusivity must be part of pre-school education as well. The experience of educational segregation at the pre-school level does directly threaten a child's social development.²¹ In order to ensure social opportunities and development of children with disabilities at a young age, inclusivity in the classroom must begin at the pre-school level. This does not mean that young children with disabilities must be in the classroom all the time, but that there must be some interactions between children with and without disabilities in an educational setting. Local and national pre-school education systems need to allow

²⁰ Koster et al., "Social Participation," 71.

²¹ W. N. Bender and M. E. Wall, "Social-Emotional Development of Students with Learning Disabilities," *Learning Disability Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 321.

children with disabilities, with the help of parents and resource teachers, to engage with other students at the pre-school level.

Children with disabilities have the right to access safe and quality schools, just like their non-disabled peers. In order to create a global society where people with disabilities are accepted and viewed as positive contributors, children must experience and learn these values firsthand. The best way to do so is to promote and implement comprehensive, inclusive educational policies. While the global development agenda has asked states to pursue inclusive schools, the actual work must be done locally, in classrooms and school systems, to create spaces where children with disabilities can connect, learn and grow as equals.

In October 2016, at the Global Symposium on Overcoming Social Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness at McGill University, Tim Shriver, Chairman of Special Olympics International, powerfully stated that when children with disabilities connect with children without disabilities, the gap between perceived disability and ability disappears and communities become stronger.²² Inclusive schools ultimately will allow this positive vision of community development to take place and to flourish. When children with disabilities are included in the learning process, they will also be included in all other aspects of societies as equal citizens and contributors.

²² Timothy P. Shriver, "Social Connectedness and Movement Building" (speech, Global Symposium on Overcoming Social Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness, McGill University, QC, October 25, 2016).

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