

**Forum:** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

**Issue:** Increasing access to equitable education for students with disabilities

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## **Introduction:**

Within the United Nations, the term “disability” is defined as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.” Between 93 million and 150 million children are estimated to live with impairments worldwide, according to UNESCO. They are among the youngsters who are most marginalized and left out. As a result of the limited resources at hand, they are frequently forgotten about in humanitarian efforts. Around 90% of disabled children in underdeveloped countries aren't attending school, according to UNICEF. Children with disabilities are frequently excluded from learning even when they are enrolled in school because the curriculum is not modified to meet their requirements and the teachers lack the skills or time to offer specialized support and learning help. Fairness, or ensuring that no person's personal or social situation prevents them from accessing education, and inclusion, or ensuring that all students have access to the same level of education, are the two components that make up equitable education. There are many different things that prevent equal access to education. A discriminatory policy that separates students or a lack of any policy that deals with students with disabilities are examples of policy and systemic factors. Other examples include a lack of resources to enact policy or inadequate teacher training. Social variables include unfavorable parental and social perceptions of disability, which might be a result of cultural or religious beliefs that infirmities should be punished. Children with disabilities can have their views heard in decisions that affect their lives by using the power of inclusive education systems to magnify those voices. Their capacities to engage actively in decision-making and in social, cultural, and

economic life are developed through the use of inclusive education systems, which also ensure that they have access to all of their legal rights. There are various solutions to attaining equitable education for students with disabilities, and regardless of the challenges faced by various educational sectors, it is an issue that requires immediate action for the betterment of the global community in the long term.

### Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Disability:** “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.”
2. **Equitable education:** “Focuses on taking those opportunities presented to students and infusing them with support and resources to turn the education system into a level playing field. This means that disadvantaged students will get the support they need to become equal to students who are not disadvantaged.”
3. **Special education:** A type of education that focuses specifically on nurturing children with mental or physical disabilities
4. **Special needs:** “In some countries, it covers only children with physical disabilities, while in others it includes a broader range of students covering, for instance, students facing learning difficulties or socio-economically disadvantaged students.”
5. **Equity Gap:** Lower standards of education for students with disabilities as compared to other students due to various factors that include insufficient funding, lack of teacher training, etc. This may be applied to other disadvantaged students as well who stem from a lower socioeconomic status.
6. **Achievement Gap:** Preconceived notions that portray ideals that disadvantaged and disabled students perform poorly on standardized tests and other assessments as compared to their peers

## Background Information

### Why equity gaps exist for students with disabilities:

As parents conceal their children's disabilities to prevent rejection or nations fail to properly detect and assess children with disabilities, the exclusion is frequently made worse by the invisibility of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are defined and evaluated by what they lack rather than what they can provide, regardless of the degree and type of exclusion that they experience. The UN and UNICEF work to ensure that all children have fair access to education as a fundamental human right. Children must receive an education in order to build their human capital and improve their future social and economic prospects. There are various factors that contribute to such disparities in education. Firstly, in underdeveloped countries, it is extremely difficult to monitor and track children who have disabilities, and creating special programs for them is out of the question since education systems are grossly underfunded. For example, according to Tsegaye Tesemma, Head of the Children and the Family Programme for the African Child Policy Forum (ACPA), "Monitoring disability rates of children in developing countries such as Africa is difficult due to a lack of study and inclusion of the group." These groups of students aren't being given adequate attention, due to the pre-existing issues in the education system. Lack of funding and knowledge seems to be the main issue in most countries. Over the past 30 to 40 years, the disparities between children with and without disabilities have significantly widened. In the poor world, initiatives to enhance educational outcomes for children with impairments have mainly been ignored. For instance, the disparity in primary school completion between challenged and non-disabled children is 15 percentage points for girls and 18 percentage points for boys, despite high primary school enrollment in many nations. A study named "*Disability Gaps in Educational Attainment and Literacy*" also reveals that kids with intellectual or multiple disabilities typically do worse than kids with physical impairments or hearing, sight, or speech-related difficulties. According to experts,

barriers to education for students with disabilities frequently include a lack of knowledge about their requirements, a teacher shortage, inadequate facilities, inadequate classroom assistance, and inadequate learning tools. Working towards a universal solution is also difficult, as data collection on students with disabilities differs from country to country, and sometimes state to state. Furthermore, many countries still have disparities among disabled students based on gender, race, etc. For example, a 2011 World Health Organization (WHO) report found that “50.6% of males with disabilities completed primary school while only 41.7% of girls with disabilities did.” All these factors have further disintegrated the situation and therefore this issue requires immediate action.

## **Current Situation**

### **The effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:**

In 2021, the pandemic was still causing partial or complete school closures for up to 50% of youngsters worldwide. Unsurprisingly, these closures made schools with a large majority of kids of color even worse off in terms of achievement gaps for students with disabilities. One major factor was the lack of established plans in many school districts, many of which did not even require the monitoring of student's academic progress or attendance. Children who were experiencing relapses or aggravations of preexisting mental health issues also confronted difficulties. Suicidality and depression both rose sharply. According to a study on the behavior of youngsters with disabilities during the pandemic, 77.5 percent of them were sleeping fewer hours than they had been, 58.9 percent were eating more processed foods, 83.7 percent were engaging in less physical activity, and 92.9 percent were spending more time on screens. The problems persist even now when most schools have switched back to face-to-face instruction. A dearth of replacement teachers has left many teachers sick with COVID-19, leaving many students without any educational materials in school

gymnasiums or auditoriums. Professor Kathryn Underwood from Ryerson's School of Early Childhood Studies notes that the experiences of disabled children in the pandemic have been mixed, with some children benefiting greatly from being at home and online. However, a lot of kids have also dealt with severe seclusion, subpar educational opportunities, and a lack of access to programs to which they are entitled. She claimed that “the pandemic has illustrated inequality in a tangible way and disabled persons have been particularly hard struck by the pandemic's health effects as well as regulations that do not consider their lifestyles.” For instance, school closings hampered students with disabilities' access to specialized educational services and programs. The government's attitude to learning while participating in covid, according to Underwood and her colleagues from Ryerson, the University of Guelph, McMaster University, York University, UBC, and Brandon University, is based on ableism. According to them, classifying disability-specific services as optional reflects the low regard in which disabled people's lives are held. According to Underwood, some families her team spoke to stated that their children were relieved to not have to participate in the social interactions associated with school because of prejudice and difficulties in the setting that predated the pandemic.

This sort of regression is dangerous to the educational system and society as a whole. Strides were being made toward equitable education prior to the pandemic as the issue was finally coming to light. However, the pandemic has given the spotlight back to the “normal” students. The transition to online learning hasn't been easy for anyone and it was a new experience for all involved, but it was designed to accommodate students without special needs. It was efficient and required less hassle, and that has left many disabled students feeling excluded. This feels like a backward move on part of many education systems since students with disabilities are once again being marginalized due to their special needs for equitable education.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### Singapore:

Singapore has made significant efforts in recent years to become a more inclusive society by enabling children with special needs to obtain an education that is as close to the mainstream as feasible. This is despite the fact that each student has unique educational needs due to their learning challenges, physical limitations, or emotional and behavioral issues. A notable example is Pathlight School, which opened in 2004 and was Singapore's first autism-focused school to offer both the country's standard academic curriculum and life skills. Six SPED schools in Singapore have reduced their fees by at least 25% for Singaporeans since January of this year due to the increased needs and greater quantity of resources needed in SPED schools. This makes it possible for families of children with special education needs (SEN) to give their kids access to a more affordable education.

### Majors NGO and agency involvement:

The "Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities" (GPcwd), a network that promotes the integration of disability rights in all global child-related agendas, was established in 2012 to advocate for the rights of children with disabilities in the new agenda. Over 20 international, national, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), academia, and commercial sector actors make up its partners, which are coordinated by UNICEF. The Task Force on Inclusive Education, chaired by UNICEF and UNESCO, is one of GPcwd's four task forces. Its first-year action plan calls for fostering inclusive and accessible learning environments with the help of already available resources, investing in teacher training for disability-inclusive education, and enhancing data collecting to track advancement and assemble evidence.

**Iran:**

The majority of Iranian youngsters with disabilities see attending school to be an unattainable goal. The experience is frequently difficult for the very small number of people who can attend. Only 150,000 of the estimated 1.5 million school-age children with disabilities were enrolled in classes during the 2018–19 academic year, with 43% attending mainstream schools and the remainder special schools. According to a 2017 government research in Iran, absences from school were most frequently caused by disabilities. Their exclusion is due to a variety of factors, such as a required medical examination, physical accessibility issues, staff discrimination, and a lack of proper training for teachers and school principals in inclusive education practices.

**South Africa:**

South Africa keeps growing its parallel special education system for those who are assessed to have persistent learning difficulties that prevent them from attending a general education program that is inclusive of all students. According to studies by Human Rights Watch and other expert groups, social workers and school administrators frequently refer kids to special schools after a protracted and laborious process of assessments and referrals, sometimes following a brief stay in a regular school. These recommendations frequently keep kids out of inclusive, mainstream schooling. This restricts their ability to receive the full cycle of basic education to which they are legally entitled. Many kids attend special schools that isolate them from their peers and do not promote their overall growth or cognitive abilities.

**USA:**

At the end of the 2017–18 academic year, there were almost 7 million impaired students in the United States, according to statistics gathered by the Pew Research Center. The number of pupils with special needs has increased by 11% since the academic year 2000–01. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought up some particular difficulties that won't soon be resolved, even if the IDEA ensures a certain standard of education for challenged students between the ages of 3 and 21. Millions of students nationwide made the switch to online learning, and those with special needs found it particularly difficult. Disabled Americans feel less at ease using technology than their non-disabled counterparts, according to a survey of Americans aged 18 and older. Furthermore, fewer impaired adults (39 percent compared to 65% of all adults) have a high level of confidence in their abilities to use the Internet and other forms of communication. 23% of impaired adults report never using the Internet at all, compared to 8% of non-disabled persons.

**UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events****Establishment of the EFA:**

The "Education for All" (EFA) project, which aims to give all children, youth, and adults high-quality fundamental education, contributes to the global framework for children with disabilities and was reinforced by the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). The World Conference on Special Needs Education (1994) produced the Salamanca Declaration as a framework for action for regular schools to provide equitable access to education by accommodating the varied needs of all children. The EFA initiative was first introduced at the World Conference on Education for All (1990). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the World Bank coordinate the EFA movement, which guides the activities of all UN

organizations that provide education to children. The expansion of comprehensive early childhood education with a focus on access for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children, ensuring that all girls and children living in challenging circumstances have access to free primary education, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015 are all part of the EFA's goals.

### **Major Resolution Passed:**

“The Council has before it the Empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ([A/HRC/40/27](#) ).”

In the discussion that followed, speakers emphasized that denying children with disabilities the right to an education reinforced widely held attitudes and the assumption of their diminished capacity. They also noted that the marginalization of children with disabilities was exacerbated by the prevalent perception of disability as a disadvantage. All children are given the competence, information, and skills they need to be autonomous and to make decisions about their life through inclusive education. It gave them the chance to grow in terms of personalities, skills, and capacities while also giving them the tools they needed to engage fully in society. Some speakers urged schools to serve as models of inclusiveness by meeting all students' educational requirements in one place. They voiced concern on the use of restraint and seclusion against kids with disabilities in schools, as well as other restrictive practices that are not subject to regulation. Other speakers expressed concern over the forced treatment of disabled children, particularly girls and teenagers, including forced sterilization, forced contraception, and forced abortion. That was frequently founded on false beliefs and prejudices about how capable women with impairments were of raising children.

## Possible Solutions

### 1. Establishing an inclusive educational system:

While inclusive education restructures the entire school culture, including policies and practices, to meet the needs of all students, integrated education mainstreams children with disabilities into the classroom by setting up special accommodating courses. The idea behind inclusive education is that although children have various traits, skills, and needs, they should be able to study together in a setting that doesn't emphasize individual distinctions but rather sees integration as a chance for growth and richer learning.

### 2. Implementing the use of assistive technology in the classroom:

For children with impairments to be effectively incorporated into the educational system, numerous physical adjustments are needed. Along with physical modifications like ramps and wide doorways, these accommodations also include access to tools like sign language and Braille that are integrated into completely adaptive curricula. The physical aids that enable kids with impairments fall under the broad category of assistive technology (AT). A wide variety of accessibility and environmental controls, such as electronic controls or Braille signs, listening aids, such as captions and hearing aids, alternative/augmentative communication tools, such as communication software and picture boards, computer-based instruction, and visual aids, such as books on tape and Brailers, are all examples of assistive technology.

### 3. Appropriate teacher training programs:

Shifting to schools that are completely inclusive is significantly hampered by inadequate teacher preparation and expertise. Such training should entail establishing targeted training and mainstreaming special needs education across training curricula. Systematic changes in pre-service and in-service education should focus on collaborative teaching and differentiated instruction, where the same material can be presented using a variety of teaching strategies in response to various learning levels and styles across the classroom. These methods have been shown to successfully address the various needs of all children. UNICEF advises that child-centered methodologies, teaching methods in multicultural and inclusive contexts, and how to help children with disabilities and unique educational needs should all be included in the teacher-training curriculum.

**4. A shift in attitude:**

The solutions mentioned above can only be implemented if there is a change in the way people view disabled students. Historically they have been viewed as less and unworthy of an equal life, however, the reality is quite the opposite. They should be given a chance to experience the same level of education as any other child and contribute to society to the best of their ability.

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### Useful Links:

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2. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.587045/full> (More detail provided about the various terminology used and history of the issue at hand)
3. [https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/final\\_sw\\_d\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/final_sw_d_report_2021.pdf) (Great source for understanding how the pandemic affected the issue at hand)

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