



Learning is For Everyone (LiFE): Paving the Pathway for Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Children with disabilities remain among the most excluded learners globally. Despite growing policy commitments to inclusive education, persistent barriers related to stigma, inaccessible environments, rigid curricula, limited teacher preparation, and insufficient data systems continue to prevent their meaningful participation and learning. The Learning is For Everyone (LiFE) research initiative, led by UNICEF Innocenti in partnership with UNICEF country offices, offered a comprehensive mixed-methods, system-level analysis of inclusive education for children with disabilities, aiming to identify the challenges countries face in making their education systems more inclusive. The research was conducted in seven countries: Cambodia, Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, and Paraguay. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative primary data from teachers, head teachers, district officials, parents, and children with and without disabilities; alongside secondary analysis of Programme for International Student Assessment – Development (PISA-D) 2018 and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 6 data, and a targeted global literature review, this paper synthesizes the key findings and evidence-based policy recommendations organized around three interconnected action areas: Recognize, Reform, and Resource. Findings reveal that exclusion is not inevitable but often reflective of systemic gaps that can be addressed. The paper concludes with a call for sustained political will and financial investment, coordinated intersectoral action, and the recognition of diversity as a strength that benefits all learners.

Keywords: *inclusive education, children with disabilities, Universal Design for Learning, low-and middle-income countries*

1. Introduction

Children with disabilities were half as likely to attend school as their peers without disabilities, despite education being a fundamental right for every child [1] [2]. Even when enrolled, they face persistent barriers to learning. Data from 2021 showed that children with disabilities are 42 per cent less likely to develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills. These figures underscore that access alone is insufficient. Education systems must enable meaningful participation and learning for every child, including children with disabilities who represent 10 per cent of children aged 0-17 globally [3].

Providing meaningful learning opportunities for all children requires a systemic shift towards inclusive education. Inclusive education, as defined in General Comment No. 4 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), involves comprehensive reforms to content, pedagogy, structures, and strategies, aiming to ensure responsive, participatory, and supportive learning environments for all [4]. This vision aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which affirms the global commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education [5].

Evidence consistently shows that inclusive settings benefit all learners. They boost the self-efficacy, social skills, and academic performance of students with disabilities, while also supporting neurodivergent learners and those with invisible or uncertified needs through more responsive instruction [6]. Students without disabilities benefit as well, gaining problem-solving, interpersonal, and socioemotional skills from learning alongside diverse peers [7], yet these gains are often limited by inadequate financing, system capacity, teacher preparation, and persistent stigma.

The Learning is For Everyone (LiFE) research initiative, led by UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence–Innocenti in partnership with UNICEF country offices and ministries of education in seven countries (Cambodia, Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, and Paraguay), was designed to generate system-level evidence to address these challenges. Guided by the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) volume 3 guidelines, the research examined how policies, school structures, pedagogy, data systems, and accountability mechanisms interact to enable or constrain the implementation of inclusive education [7]. This approach allowed an emphasis on the principle that inclusive education should be a core component of an education system, requiring systemic reform rather than being treated as an add-on.



This paper presents a synthesis of the findings and policy recommendations, structured around three action areas derived from the research: Recognize, Reform, and Resource. It argues that governments must **recognize** children with disabilities as rights-holders and ensure their inclusion is visible and valued through improved understanding and documentation of disability. It calls for **reform** across education systems so that policies, structures, and professional practices respond to learner diversity rather than relying on adhoc efforts. Finally, it emphasizes the need to **resource** inclusive education through sustained investments in accessible environments, materials, and human capacity to translate commitments into meaningful change

2. Methodology

The main goal of the LiFE research was to generate evidence on the status of inclusive education for children with disabilities across pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels, and to provide evidence-based policy recommendations relevant at both country and global levels. The study followed a mixed-methods design, combining primary and secondary data analysis, to answer three core research questions about the barriers children with disabilities face, the system-level constraints shaping provision, and the opportunities that can be scaled to strengthen inclusive education.

The research was anchored in the inclusive education framework in the ESA Volume 3, which examines disability-inclusive education systems across four dimensions: supply (teachers, infrastructure, learning materials), quality (curriculum, assessment, learning support), demand (attitudes, costs, perceived benefits), and the enabling environment (laws, policies, data, finance). This framework informed all stages of the research, from design to interpretation of data.

2.1 Instruments and Data Analysis

The paper used a comprehensive mixed-methods design drawing on three data sources: **(i) a targeted global literature review** of recent academic and policy work on disability-inclusive education; **(ii) country-level primary research** involving digital surveys with teachers, head teachers, and district officials in six countries, along with interviews and focus groups with children aged 10–16 (with and without disabilities), their parents, and teachers; **(iii) and secondary analysis** of international datasets, including PISA for Development (2018), PISA 2022 teacher data from low- and middle-income countries, and existing analyses of the Child Functioning Module from MICS Round 6.

Ethical approval was received for the country-level research from an Institutional Review Board, and ethical standards were applied throughout the study, using age-appropriate assent to ensure children's informed participation. Accessibility was prioritized through accommodations such as sign language interpretation and simplified materials to support children's comfort and well-being.

2.2 Limitations

Certain questionnaire items were adapted to local contexts, reducing the potential for direct cross-country comparison. Response rates varied across countries and participant groups, affecting representativeness. Although accommodations were provided for children with disabilities, additional adjustments to protocols were required at times, and translation from local languages may have led to a loss of nuance. For the secondary data analysis, access to datasets varied, and definitions of disability differed across sources, requiring careful interpretation.

3. Findings

3.1 Recognize: Making Disability Understood and Valued

Advancing inclusive education requires recognizing children with disabilities as rights-holders, learners, and active contributors. This begins with shifting how disability is understood, measured, and addressed.

Attitudes and perceptions of disability

LiFE evidence shows that the understanding of disability varies widely across countries and stakeholders, shaping attitudes and influencing the direction of inclusive education reforms. Policy frameworks range from medical-model approaches, as seen in Cambodia and Kyrgyzstan, to more social-model orientations in Djibouti, Mozambique, Paraguay, and Nepal—differences that affect whether systems prioritize segregation or inclusive practices. Across all countries, participants' perceptions were often medicalized, with disability viewed as a deficit, especially for invisible disabilities.



Attitudes among parents, teachers, and children were mixed: many expressed support for inclusion, yet misconceptions, stigma, and uncertainty persisted. These perceptions have concrete implications, reinforcing expectations of separate provision and limiting pedagogical adaptation in mainstream schools. Some countries, such as Djibouti and Nepal, have begun fostering more positive attitudes through structured interactions between children with and without disabilities, helping challenge stereotypes and build more inclusive school cultures.

“Boys with disabilities are people just like us; they are not different from us—they are beautiful human beings.” (Child without disability, Primary school, Paraguay)

Identification systems

Consistent with global trends, LiFE research highlighted a lack of systematic protocols for identifying barriers to learning and participation. Screening tools exist in most countries, but tools designed to identify functional barriers within classrooms are largely absent. Many children remain unidentified, particularly those with invisible disabilities. Particularly, screening tools remain widely used but face persistent limitations, especially in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), where many children are still not identified. Coverage is uneven because tools are often not culturally or contextually adapted, and “culture-free” instruments may miss context-specific developmental issues [8]. Evidence from systematic reviews shows that screening tools tend to be less effective outside their original linguistic or cultural settings, and culturally sensitive tools for LMICs remain scarce [9].

LiFE data indicated that over 70% of trained teachers in Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Nepal, and Paraguay reported that their training helped them identify indicators of potential disability (Figure 1). Nonetheless, clear referral pathways linking identification to support within and beyond school are still needed to ensure timely provision of services.

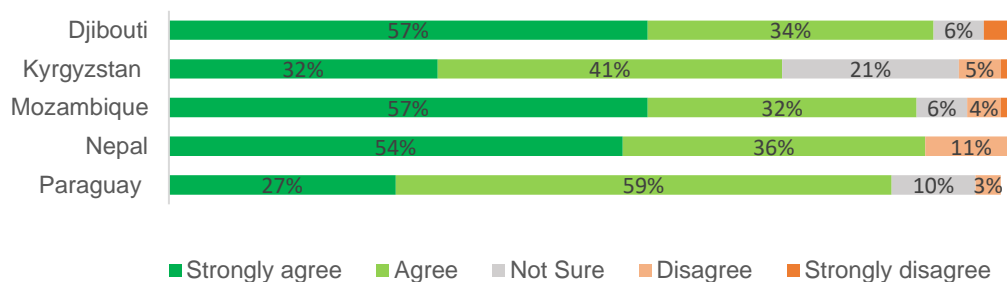


Fig. 1. Teacher’s agreement on how training courses have helped them to identify indicators of a potential disability or learning difficulty

Source: Author’s elaboration, based on LiFE teacher surveys.

Disability data systems

LiFE evidence revealed that while most countries collect some disability information, their systems still rely heavily on medical classifications, and only a few capture functional difficulties—limiting their ability to plan inclusive support. Although six of the seven countries use Washington Group (WG) questions in national censuses, integration into Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) was less common, with only Mozambique and Nepal adopting functional approaches in school-level data. These findings mirror global patterns: many regions lack unified disability definitions and rely on medical models, though promising initiatives—such as MICS-6 comparable data, the adoption of WG tools in East and Southern Africa, and recent efforts to make large-scale assessments more accessible[10]—show a broader shift toward functional, rights-based data systems that can strengthen national reforms.

3.2 Reform: Transforming Education Systems

Inclusive education requires system-wide change; LiFE evidence shows persistent gaps but also highlighted positive dispersed practices showing signs that progress is achievable.

Access and school placement

LiFE findings showed that children with disabilities faced persistent barriers to accessing and thriving in mainstream education, including reliance on special schools driven by concerns about capacity, safety, and resources in regular schools, as well as mixed attitudes from teachers and parents shaped by system constraints. These patterns mirror global evidence from PISA-D and MICS, which consistently document lower attendance among children with disabilities, higher rates of exclusion, weaker learning outcomes, and gender-specific barriers such as inadequate WASH facilities for girls with disabilities.



LiFE qualitative data also revealed that some families perceived special schools as safer due to less incidents of bullying, while examples from Mozambique highlight how strong school leadership and community partnerships can foster more inclusive environments. International evidence, such as resource centre models in Ethiopia and Paraguay, highlights how mainstream systems can benefit from the expertise of special schools, the knowledge of specialised professionals, and the use of accessible teaching and learning materials, to build their capacity on how to support children with disabilities.

Inclusive teaching practices & teacher training

Despite limited formal training, many teachers across LiFE countries reported intuitively applying inclusive practices, drawing on principles of frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), collaborative learning, and differentiated instruction, by repeating key information, offering individual support, using real-life examples, and adapting classroom seating arrangements. In Nepal, 93% of teachers reported seating students based on individual needs. However, in most LiFE countries fewer than 20% of teachers received formal training in disability-inclusive education (Figure 2). Existing training was frequently short, irregular, and theoretical. Large class sizes, rigid curricula, and limited resources were cited as barriers to implementing inclusive approaches effectively. The OECD TALIS 2024 survey confirms this is a global challenge: 1 in 4 teachers across OECD countries reported needing additional training in teaching students with special education needs [11].

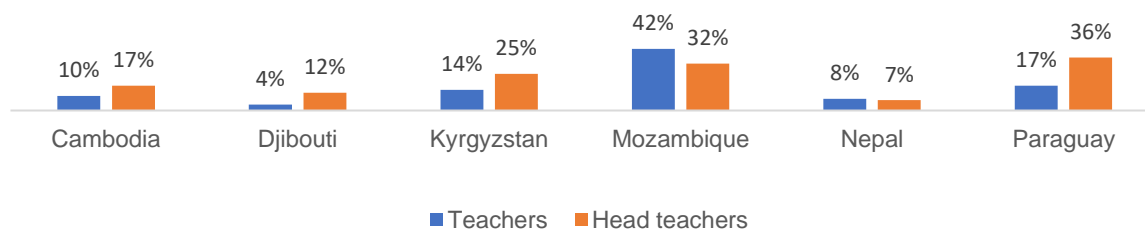


Fig. 2. Percentage of teachers and head teachers that reported receiving training in disability-inclusive education, by country

Source: Author's elaboration, based on LiFE head teacher and teacher surveys.

Assessment for all

LiFE evidence showed that although many countries have adopted inclusive education policies, inclusive assessment strategies were lagging, with most countries missing clear frameworks or applying them inconsistently. This often meant children with disabilities were assessed in ways that did not meet their needs. Teachers and students across LiFE countries reported that accommodations were rare and often limited to extra time, which was not always effective. Nonetheless, more meaningful adaptations were also observed, including sign language interpretation, Braille versions of tests, scribes, and quieter testing environments, indicating that good practices exist but require systematisation and scaling. These findings align with global research, which shows that inclusive assessment is conceptually underdeveloped, overly focused on categorisation, and rarely designed to support diverse learners [12].

3.3 Resource: Investing in Inclusion

Achieving inclusive education requires sustained investment in both material and human resources. Without adequate resourcing, policy commitments cannot be translated into practice.

Physical accessibility

School infrastructure and transportation were major barriers to school access across all LiFE countries. Families of children with disabilities reported lacking accessible and affordable transport, with some parents, predominantly mothers, having to leave their employment to accompany their children to school or stay with them during the day to support them with mobility or hygiene activities. Within schools, the absence of ramps, narrow doorways, overcrowded classrooms, and inaccessible WASH facilities restricted mobility and participation. Head teacher surveys confirmed limited availability of essential accessibility features, especially tactile floor signals and accessible toilets (Figure 3).

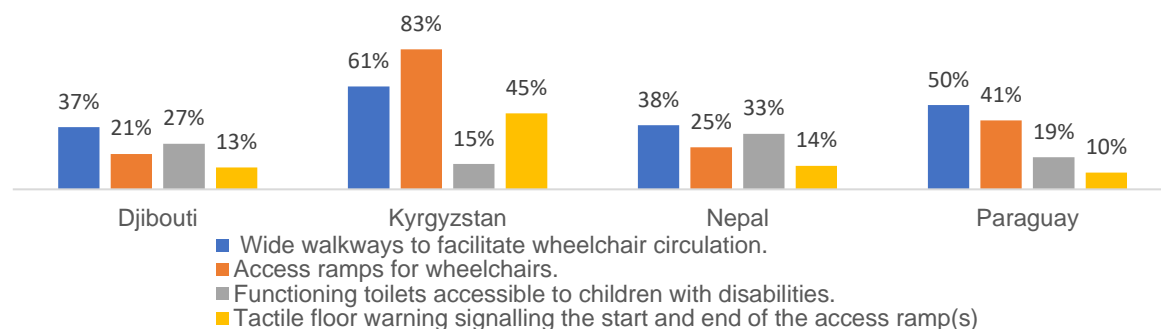


Fig. 3. Percentage of head teachers who reported the following accessibility features were available as part of their school infrastructure, by country

Source: Author's elaboration, based on the LiFE head teacher survey.

Teaching and learning materials and assistive technologies

Across all countries, teachers, parents, and children reported shortages of general educational resources and disability-specific materials, such as large-print books, audiobooks and tactile or hands-on manipulatives. Teachers frequently created low-cost materials using locally available resources; such as pebbles and seeds for mathematics in Nepal, or recycled materials for Braille instruction in Mozambique; demonstrating strong innovation in the face of resource constraints. However, these efforts were often individual and isolated, rather than systematic. Paraguay's Accessible Digital Textbooks (ADTs) initiative – developed using UDL principles - was highlighted as a promising effort, enabling students with disabilities to access the same content as their peers without disabilities in accessible formats [13].

Specialist support and teachers with disabilities

Specialist support was scarce across most LiFE countries. Psychologists and physiotherapists were the most commonly available specialists; yet sign language interpreters were scarce, with only 9 per cent of head teachers in Nepal and 5 per cent in Paraguay reporting their availability. Teachers with disabilities remained underrepresented across all LiFE countries and faced acute challenges in their work environments. Interview data revealed that stigma and discrimination from school staff and families, as well as inaccessible school infrastructure and materials, can hinder their ability to carry out their roles effectively. Yet LiFE findings showed teachers with disabilities brought unique strengths to schools and classrooms: greater empathy, a culture of acceptance and equity among staff, adaptive instructional strategies, and the ability to serve as role models for students with disabilities.

"It's wonderful that people with disabilities can also be part of the teaching profession. I am very happy. I completed my Bachelor's using Braille (...) and became a relief primary teacher. My focus is on supporting the education of children with disabilities... Two of my students from this school have successfully passed the Teacher Service Commission exams and are now working as teachers. (Teacher with disability Inclusive school, Nepal)

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1 Recognize: Prioritized actions to recognize children with disabilities include:

- **Foster positive attitudes toward disability aligned with the social and human rights models.** This entails implementing multi-level sensitization campaigns, developed with OPDs, to challenge stigma and stereotypes. Within the education sector, integrate disability-related content into curricula and teacher training that reflects lived experiences [14]. Ensure authenticity and impact by meaningfully involving persons with disabilities—including children—in the design, delivery, and evaluation of all awareness and sensitization efforts [15].
- **Communicate and demonstrate the benefits of disability-inclusive education for all learners** by mobilizing strong political commitment and sustained sensitization efforts that highlight how inclusion strengthens cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for every student [16]. School leaders and teachers should be engaged as advocates and evidence champions,

helping shape positive attitudes, mobilize resources, and create safe, supportive environments for teaching learners with disabilities.

- **Establish educational identification tools to effectively identify barriers to participation and learning, and ensure that appropriate support is provided to children.** This requires designing school-ready tools focused on functional needs and participation, paired with strong teacher training so they can use them effectively and provide timely accommodations. Clear referral pathways must link school-level identification to specialized services through coordinated action across education, health, and social protection [17]. To sustain this system, monitoring mechanisms should be integrated into EMIS to track identification practices, teacher preparedness, available supports, and student outcomes [18].
- **Strengthen collection, analysis, and use of to properly identify barriers to participation and learning, in line with inclusive principles.** This requires reviewing and adapting national and local data systems so they can capture disaggregated information on participation, learning barriers, and support needs. To ensure data quality, officials involved in data collection must be trained to collect, enter, and analyze information accurately, supported by quality-assurance and feedback mechanisms that promote coherence across the system while allowing schools flexibility to respond to local needs [19].

4.2 Reform: Priority actions to reform education systems to become more inclusive include:

- **Strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools to enrol students with disabilities.** This includes fostering collaboration between mainstream and special schools so teachers can benefit from disability-specific expertise; progressively transforming special schools into inclusion support centres that provide ongoing guidance, resources, and specialist services; and expanding community-based outreach to ensure families understand children's right to attend mainstream schools and feel supported in enrolling them [20].
- **Institutionalize the use of inclusive strategies in teaching and learning.** This requires implementing flexible curricula grounded in frameworks such as UDL, cooperative learning, and differentiated instruction [21]; creating opportunities for teachers to share effective inclusive practices and ensuring that teacher training embeds these approaches as core content both in pre-service and ongoing professional development.
- **Transform teacher training to systematically integrate inclusive education.** This means revising pre- and in-service training so disability-inclusive education becomes mandatory and embedded in accreditation [22]; ensuring programmes address the full range of inclusive strategies such as UDL, differentiated instruction, accessible materials, and formative assessment; guaranteeing long-term policy and financing support; and equipping head teachers to foster collaboration, allocate resources, and create school cultures that enable teachers to implement inclusive practices effectively.
- **Identify and institutionalize teaching practices that promote inclusion by embedding them within teacher professional development.** This requires identifying teachers who excel at inclusive practices, creating structured opportunities for peer learning, and formally recognizing the leadership role these teachers play. Governments should use existing monitoring processes to spot these teachers; ministries of education should embed teacher-led learning into national professional development frameworks; and both national and local authorities should provide recognition, training, and incentives that reinforce inclusive practice as a core professional competency [23].
- **Formalize disability-responsive assessment accommodation guidelines.** Ministries of education should map and document current practices to build a comprehensive, adaptable set of options for all learners; teacher training institutes must equip teachers to implement these accommodations; and assessment outcomes should be used to identify learning needs, adjust instruction, and refine curriculum and teacher preparation [24].

4.3 Resource: Prioritized actions to sustaining and enhancing resourcing of inclusive education are:

- **Improve physical accessibility by addressing both transportation and school infrastructure to ensure all children can reach schools and learn within them safely.** This includes developing and enforcing national guidelines for accessible transport, adopting a phased approach to retrofitting vehicles and buildings, embedding Universal Design principles in new



school construction standards, and conducting regular accessibility audits [25]. Where resources are limited, immediate low-cost accommodations should be prioritized, such as assigning ground-floor classrooms to groups that include students with physical disabilities, or modifying classroom lighting and acoustics.

- **Strengthen resource provision and scale teacher-created low-cost materials**, by mapping existing resources and gaps, and combining system-wide investments with targeted funding for accessible materials, assistive devices, and specialist support across central, regional, and local levels. Governments should explore expanding access to multidisciplinary specialists through itinerant models and cross-sector coordination [26]. Teacher-created low-cost materials should be systematically documented and scaled through open-access repositories integrated into national planning, while AI-supported tools are promoted to speed up the creation of accessible resources under clear policies, ethical standards, and UDL-aligned training [27].
- **Recruit and support teachers with disabilities through inclusive recruitment practices.** Teacher training programmes at all levels must provide accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and UDL-aligned content, guaranteeing appropriate support from enrolment to certification. Schools should also enforce accessibility standards in buildings, materials, and assistive devices, enabling teachers with disabilities to perform their roles without barriers [28]. Head teacher preparation should also incorporate disability awareness to eliminate hiring bias.

5. Conclusions

The LiFE research demonstrated that the exclusion of children with disabilities is not inevitable but stems from addressable gaps in infrastructure, teacher preparation, data, and resources [29]. The evidence showed that inclusion is achievable and already supported by promising practices. Doing so requires political will, sustained investment, coordinated action, and a shift toward viewing diversity as a strength; recognizing children with disabilities as rights-holders, reforming systems to meet their needs, and resourcing schools with accessible environments and specialist support can drive meaningful transformation for all learners. The full report is available [here](#).

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