

Environmental Scan: Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities

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In the United States, we are fortunate enough to have state and national laws that protect the lives and education of students with disabilities. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, which prohibits the discrimination against individuals with disabilities in mainstream society and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, which ensures that children from birth to age 21 get a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, the United States is in the forefront. According to statistics from UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2013: Children with Disabilities report, it is estimated that approximately "93 million children, 1 in 20 of those aged 14 or younger, live with a moderate or severe disability of some kind." In many countries, children with disabilities are institutionalized, abandoned and neglected or their school systems cannot adequately educate them.

According to Anderson (2015), it is estimated that 500,000 physically challenged South African children are not enrolled in school even though their government claims it has achieved the Millennium development goals of enrolling all children in primary school. Even after committing to making education accessible to all disabled children and being "one of the first countries to ratify the UN's disability rights convention," South Africa continues to exclude their disabled youth (Anderson, 2015). The Human Rights Watch report, South Africa: Education Barriers for Children with Disabilities (2015), reports that this is largely due to a lack of understanding of children's disabilities and a lack of quality teacher training. These students often enter school later than their non-disabled peers, suffer physical violence and neglect, and leave school without the basic life skills needed to become productive members of society. "Contrary to the government's international and national obligations, many children are turned

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away from mainstream schools and referred to special schools often waiting for up to four years in care centers or at home for placement” (South Africa: Education Barriers for Children with Disabilities, 2015). Unlike their non-disabled peers, children who attend these special schools are often required to pay fees that many parents are unable to afford.

Similarly, in Russia, children with disabilities face innumerable barriers to quality education. According to the 2015 Human Rights Watch report, *Russia: Children with Disabilities Face Discrimination*, Russia’s government claims that educating children with disabilities is a priority, however, many schools lack the resources to provide a quality education. Russian disabled students not only face physical barriers such as the lack of wheelchair ramps and elevators, but are often unable to leave their homes because of poor accessible transportation. “The absence of assistive technology or qualified teacher aides leave most schools effectively closed to children with disabilities” Buchanan (2015) reports. Recently, in an effort to expand inclusive education, Russia’s government committed to revising their curriculum standards for disabled children and teacher training guaranteeing everyone the right to education.

In China, where the law gives all children the right to attend school, about half a million disabled migrant children are overlooked. “With 200 million adults considered migrants, living and working outside their places of official registration, schools often reject children who are not locally registered” (Tatlow, 2014). This household registration system, set up in the 1950’s to control the population, is being revised by China’s government. Unfortunately, Tatlow reports, disabled children are also rejected by schools due to the unfavorable influence from the parents of able-bodied children (2014). Another significant issue in the education of disabled students in China is the lack of educational accommodations. “Teachers intentionally ignore them due to their poor academic performance with no effort being made to meet their learning needs”

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(Feuerberg, 2013). Not only are children with visual impairments not given visual aids, enlarged text or Braille, but they are also often moved to the back of the class because they are unable to keep up with the lessons.

Discrimination in higher education is also evident in China. “Students who are blind or deaf are often shunted into vocational schools or colleges that offer training in music, painting or massage therapy - jobs deemed appropriate for the disabled” (Farrar, 2014). Disabled students are required to disclose their disabilities and any medical tests to universities often causing discrimination in the admission process. Farrar (2014) also reports the lack of teachers trained to teach students with physical or learning disabilities because many college students view the field as a “career dead end.”

In Jordan, the prospect of inclusive education is promising. At an August 2015 meeting of the Middle East Network on Innovative Teaching and Learning, teachers and educational experts discussed “an old-new pedagogy that is flexible enough to absorb all students, including those deemed marginalized, underprivileged or those with disabilities” (Azzeh, 2015). Dropout rates in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine coupled with the 1.8 million students out of school in Syria make inclusive education extremely important in the region. Kamal Jabr, inclusive education adviser at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, believes that if “schools managed to accommodate all students, they will grow up to create non-discriminatory, peaceful and stable societies” (Azzeh, 2015). Participating teachers and principals at the event cited lack of resources, support and overcrowding as well as the lack of motivation, low salaries and incentives as main reasons for the slow implementation of inclusive education in regional schools.

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Finally, in Pakistan where only “two percent of the two million school-aged children with disabilities have access to special education and another two percent are in regular schools without much academic support, the provision of inclusive education in Pakistan is almost negligible” (Is Pakistan Ready for Inclusive Education, 2014). Dr. Hameed, Professor and head of the Special Education Department at the University of Management and Technology expressed a lack of trained teachers, lack of knowledge about assessing the performance of students with disabilities as well as the challenge of producing resource and instructional materials for inclusive classroom teachers. He also believes that there is an acute shortage of “experts who have the ability to adapt curriculum and instruction according to the special needs of the students” (Is Pakistan Ready for Inclusive Education, 2014).

Through this environmental scan of inclusive education for students with disabilities, it is evident that many countries are not equipped to teach these children. The schools do not have the appropriate teaching materials, and the teachers lack proper training. In many countries, students with disabilities are shunned from their local schools and are forced to attend schools far from their home for unreasonable fees. With the stigma attached to individuals with disabilities, many Universities do not offer disability teacher training resulting in a vicious cycle. Eliminating barriers and “building up the capacity and resources of mainstream schools to provide high-quality, inclusive education” (Buchanan, 2015) is a necessary step for many countries. Legislation for students with disabilities needs to be established or improved in every country guaranteeing the rights of all students to attend school. Performing a more intensive research study to find countries where inclusive education is successful and establishing a cohesive strategy that can be shared globally is the next step

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