

Special needs education: Towards more inclusive



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Overview

There is a lack of credible data on children with disabilities in developing nations, presenting an obstacle for rigorous research evaluation of policy interventions.

Key questions to be addressed include how to create capacity among developing nations in building data on children with special needs? How to improve partnership between parents, schools, NGOs, community groups in assessing the impact of promoting inclusive educational practices? Are popular conditional cash transfers (CCT) programmes appropriate for aiding students with special needs?

Key words: Education, disabilities

Mind the gap

Enrolment rates and educational attainment of children with disabilities lag far behind those of their non-disabled peers. The school enrolment rate for children with disabilities is estimated to be some 2 to 5 percent in developing countries, a deficit that far exceeds those of other high-risk groups such as girls, children from rural areas, or from low-income families (Filmer 2008).

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The issue of education for students with special needs is mainly about inclusion, so that children and young people with disabilities have access to the same schools than children without special needs. However, the lack of support services, relevant materials and support personnel, government apathy are major stumbling blocks for implementation of integration in these countries (Peters 2003).

Advocates of special education have suggested adoption of Community Based Rehabilitation programmes, where the family is the primary trainer, and the community as a whole can be mobilized for support, as an alternative to formal schooling. The applicability of this approach to the developing countries' context remains bedevilled by lack of reliable baseline data on enrolment and identification of children with special needs (Peters 2003). Rigorous evaluations with associated data collection on Special Educational Need Children are needed to assess the sustainability of Community Based Rehabilitation interventions in the long run.

A Community Based Rehabilitation is a strategy within general community development for rehabilitation, equalization of opportunities and social inclusion of all children and adults with disabilities (WHO)

Lessons learned

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) is a strategy within general community development for rehabilitation, equalization of opportunities and social inclusion of all children and adults with disabilities.

CBR interventions have shown a positive impact in giving access to certain services to people with special needs. However, there are few rigorous impact evaluations of CBRs partly due to the multi-sectoral nature of CBR interventions, but also because of qualitative data related to overcoming cultural prejudices toward both Special Educational Needs groups (Peters 2003).

In Kenya, the role of women's groups at the grassroots in helping overcome barriers faced by children with communications disabilities are being evaluated by a DFID funded study. The results from the Randomized Control Trials are currently being collected and will be posted at the DFID knowledge and research website <http://www.disabilitykar.net/>.

Longer-term, the main constraint of such educational initiatives is the lack of social safety nets like in-kind and Conditional Cash Transfers that succeeded in increasing enrolments among low-income families.

Jamaica's 2001 Program of Advancement through Health and Education or PATH, is among the few that provide allowances for students with disabilities (Mitra 2006). Under the scheme, students whose disabilities prevent regular school attendance do not forfeit their financial assistance. Cost-benefit studies of adapting existing programmes to include Special Educational Needs children need to consider the associated impact of enhanced human capital accumulated through longer school enrolment for such groups (Lynch 1994).

An additional constraint is the absence of qualified special education teachers, educational facilities and lack of government capacity in maintaining oversight. A three-year programme begun in 2005

by the Panamanian government to include students with special needs in the regular school system is expected to yield important data on the size and scope of the problem, and provide a basis for rigorous impact evaluation on inclusive education (Birdsall 2006).

Closing the evaluation gap

Areas need further investigation on: (i) Pair qualitative approaches incorporating children's perspectives and experiences with studies on cost-effectiveness of strategies for improving partnership between parents, schools, NGOs, community groups and assessing the impact of inclusive educational practices; (ii) cost-benefits analysis of adapting Conditional Cash Transfer programmes to assist students with special needs; and (iii) assessments of changes in disability classification criteria for validity and relevance.

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Credits

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