Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia

Inclusive Education: Overcoming Barriers for Students with Disability in ASEAN

Rubeena Singh

This policy brief highlights current practices in inclusive education in elementary and secondary schools at the regional level. Please refer to the complementary research paper for detailed information at the country level. Based on analysis of current practices, many countries are making a great effort to include students with disabilities; however, there are gaps in practice and variable understanding of the word 'inclusion'. This brief provides a framework for action – specifically for schools, ministries, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States – to implement the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. This can help with an inclusive post-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) recovery, as well as address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Key Messages:

- International reports suggest that about 43.1 million children with disabilities live in East Asia and the Pacific (UNICEF, 2021). They are 0–18 years old and have many forms of disability – physical and/or intellectual. Many children with disabilities do not attend school at all.

- School closures because of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected 140 million students in Southeast Asia and 260 million students in East Asia (UNICEF, 2021). The longer students stay out of school, the less likely they are to return.

- Once schools fully reopen, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that at least 2.7 million children will not return to school, in addition to the 35 million students in East Asia and the Pacific who have dropped out (Hulshof and Tapiola, n.d.). Dropping out and not returning to school can increase the risk of abuse and exploitation, including early entrance into the informal labour market and increased risk of child marriage and teen pregnancy.

- Students with disabilities and management of diversity in the classroom present a big challenge but can also improve social cohesion amongst all learners.

- Inclusive education for all students, including those with disabilities, is high-quality education that not only teaches students valuable skills but also fosters a sense of belonging. Inclusive education is necessary at preschool, primary, secondary, and post-secondary level; technical and vocational education and training; lifelong learning; and extracurricular and social activities.

- Students with disabilities who are included in school are healthier, can apply their skills to other settings, look forward to going to school, and are more likely to be civically engaged and employed later in life.

Rubeena Singh
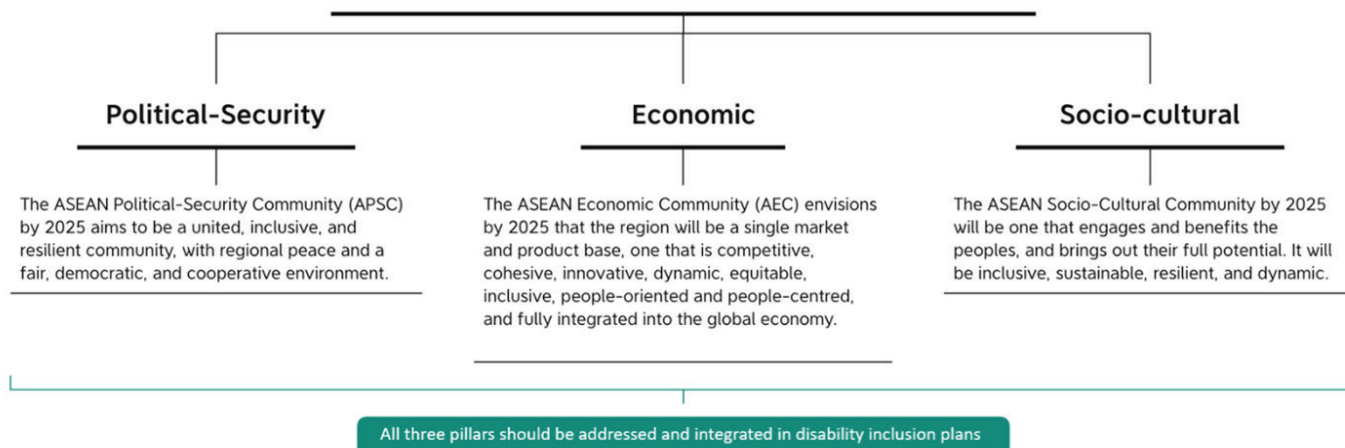Manager of Research and Knowledge, Kite Insights

1. Commitments to frameworks show goodwill across ASEAN region

All the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asian countries covered in this policy brief aspire to create inclusive education systems. The countries are committed to international and regional agreements, national and subnational frameworks, laws, and policies that promote inclusion and the moral duty to uphold the human rights of persons with disabilities. Following through on these commitments is making slow but steady progress. ASEAN Member States have made various commitments to several frameworks, including:

- Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals
- ASEAN Community Vision 2025
- ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework
- ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Incheon Strategy to 'Make the Right Real' for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, 2013–2022
- Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030
- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Plan
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 has three pillars (Figure 1). Disability inclusion measures intersect all of them. The integrated approach of the three pillars will ensure the coordination of efforts between sectors, organs, and bodies. All three pillars are interdependent and should incorporate disability inclusion.

Figure 1: Three Pillars of the ASEAN Community

Political-Security

The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) by 2025 aims to be a united, inclusive, and resilient community, with regional peace and a fair, democratic, and cooperative environment.

Economic

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) envisions by 2025 that the region will be a single market and product base, one that is competitive, cohesive, innovative, dynamic, equitable, inclusive, people-oriented and people-centred, and fully integrated into the global economy.

Socio-cultural

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community by 2025 will be one that engages and benefits the peoples, and brings out their full potential. It will be inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic.

All three pillars should be addressed and integrated in disability inclusion plans

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.
Source: ASEAN Community (n.d.), Our Communities. https://asean.org/our-communities/.
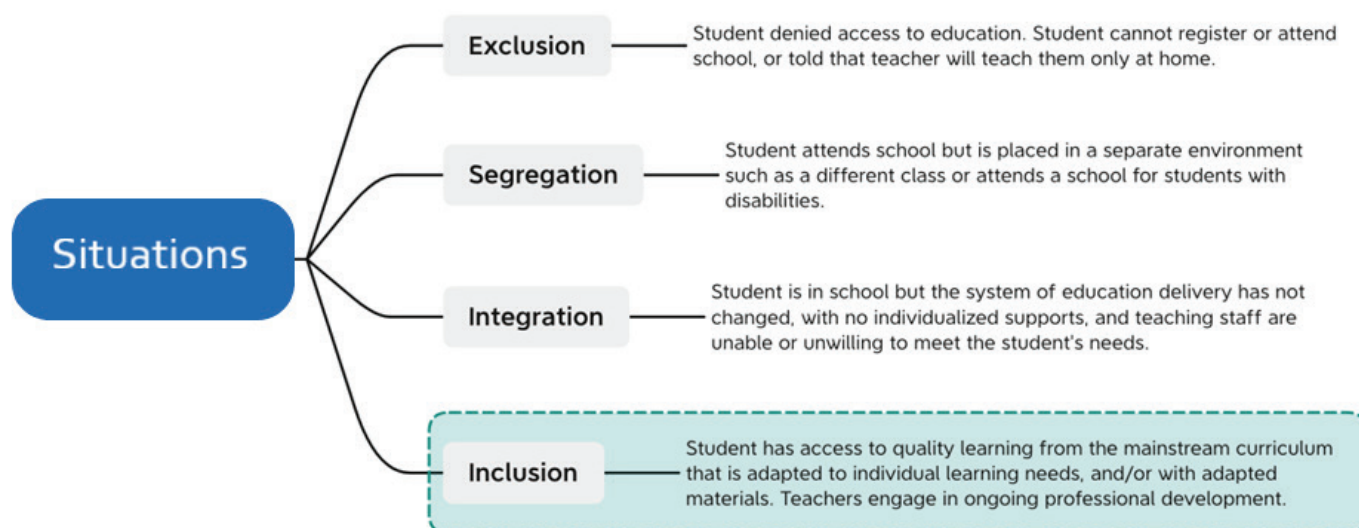
2. Understanding the difference between inclusion, integration, segregation, and exclusion

While most countries show some level of inclusive education, their definition of inclusion remains inconsistent and closer to integration and segregation. Figure 2 shows the difference between these situations.

Placing students with disabilities in the classroom without support, providing separate classrooms for them, teaching them only at home, or denying them entry to the school system is not inclusion. An inclusive education system is a **long-term, national, or regional commitment** to uphold the rights of students with disabilities so they do not face discrimination.

Figure 2: Distinctions between Exclusion, Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion

Situations

Exclusion — Student denied access to education. Student cannot register or attend school, or told that teacher will teach them only at home.

Segregation — Student attends school but is placed in a separate environment such as a different class or attends a school for students with disabilities.

Integration — Student is in school but the system of education delivery has not changed, with no individualized supports, and teaching staff are unable or unwilling to meet the student's needs.

Inclusion — Student has access to quality learning from the mainstream curriculum that is adapted to individual learning needs, and/or with adapted materials. Teachers engage in ongoing professional development.

Source: Author's summary, from Inclusion International (n.d.), Catalyst for Inclusive Education. https://inclusion-international.org/programme/catalyst-for-inclusive-education/.

3. Domains of Inclusive Education

Students with disabilities can be included in education through several entry points. Figure 3 shows interrelated domains that form a system of inclusive education.

Equitable education involves varying degrees of factors that allow students from different learning and cognitive backgrounds to learn together. Equitable does not mean equal or the same learning methods. Therefore, some level of individualisation of teaching may be needed to teach all students effectively. Support can be used rarely, sometimes, or always for long-term intervention.

Figure 3: Domains of Inclusive Education in Practice
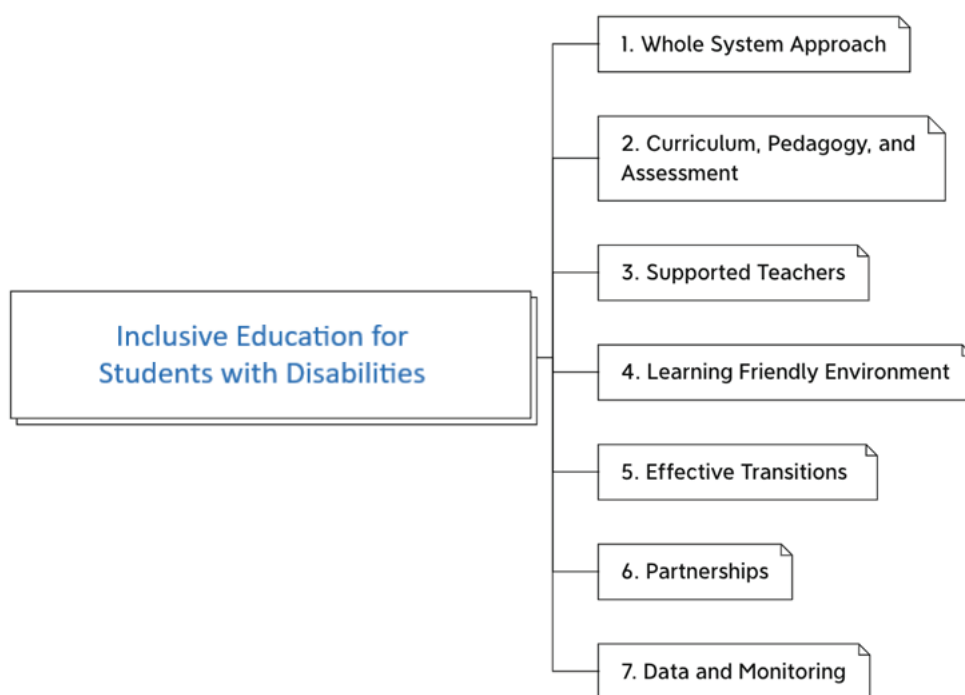
Source: UNICEF (2020).

4. Under-diagnosis overall, and diagnosis using medical models, remains a challenge

While an apparent physical disability is more readily diagnosed and treated, meeting the needs of children with intellectual disabilities is more challenging and they can be excluded from the education system altogether, especially if the disability is mild and can be misunderstood and the child mislabelled as 'lazy' or unmotivated.

Children with disabilities need to be represented in the data to build inclusive systems. Collecting sufficient data on children with disabilities and the barriers they face remains a challenge. Attempts to strengthen data collection are numerous. Singapore, for example, is developing a method to collect more accurate data on the needs of persons with disabilities and to provide holistic support such as access to services for them and their caregivers. However, the data collected in schools miss children who are out of school. Household surveys may capture missing data to provide a more realistic quantitative understanding of disability.

If a student is diagnosed with a disability, a medical model diagnosis can be limited in its ability to present strengths and weaknesses in the learning process and foster a segregated approach to intervention and education planning. When children are identified through screening services, data collection groups might not use internationally accepted frameworks or have access to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) definition of disability. The Washington Group questions can inform a social model for including students with disabilities to inform holistic policymaking that fosters coordination

and collaboration. The Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module identifies more children who have difficulties that can hinder learning.

5. Keys for success: Teacher attitude, competency, and teaching model

Quality and consistent pre-service and in-service teacher education remain fundamental for inclusive education, as teachers have the capacity to not only teach students but also create a sense of belonging amongst them. While many teachers, parents, and policymakers consider inclusion to be important, they might not be fully familiar with neurodiverse learning and principles of inclusion such as whole-system inclusion, the role of a learning-friendly environment, how to adapt a curriculum to student needs, differential learning, and universal design for learning (UDL), amongst others. The challenge presents an opportunity to think about community members as stakeholders, including those with disabilities, and to embed courses or modules on disabilities in teacher training curriculums.

A common challenge across ASEAN Member States lies in the learner-centred versus teacher-centred approach to learning. A teacher-centred approach, where the teacher follows the curriculum rigidly and 'gives' learning to students, is common in many countries. A learner-centred approach can not only increase student engagement in class but also support UDL and enhance students' critical and social thinking skills and collaborative problem solving, which can lead students to become socially responsible and civically engaged citizens. While learning the academic curriculum is important, a competency-based curriculum can broaden the definition of success in schools and lead to better learning and social outcomes. A learner-centred approach has the added benefit of students learning how to advocate for their needs, including standing up for themselves against bullying. For example, Viet Nam's national curriculum is being revised to a competency-based model, which can offer flexibility to educators in teaching methods and student assessment.

Framework for Action

Table 1 recommends ways that countries can support inclusive education for students with disabilities. The recommendations can be adopted in phases, focusing on local and provincial development before moving to national implementation. The recommendations in Table 1 are made in alignment with the principles of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), which are focused, balanced, impactful, pragmatic, inclusive, and measurable (ASEAN, 2020a).

Implementation of the framework for action should be consistent with internationally recognised principles and commitments, such as what inclusion means according to the UNCRPD, and ASEAN's commitments to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The framework is the result of thorough desk research, expert interviews, and reports on inclusive education.

Table 1: Framework for Action

Stakeholder	Recommendations
Schools	**Role of schools.** Schools are integral to the community. They are uniquely positioned to contribute to inclusive education as they can create a safe and welcoming learning environment and provide academic and social learning for current and future needs.
	1. As students return to school, reduce academic expectations of what students should have been learning while out of school. Schools should keep high-stakes assessments low. 2. While learning should be monitored throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, measuring learning outcomes at a systemic level through nationwide assessments is not necessary at this time. Instead, encourage monitoring and evaluation of learning through surveys at home, use of online platforms, or phone calls. In the classroom, a shift to formative assessments can provide meaningful learning insights in low-anxiety situations.

Stakeholder	Recommendations
	3. Ensure that any temporary assessment procedures have a high level of quality and include students with disabilities. If students are not accustomed to online assessments, and all assessments are online, students who are not familiar with or able to use this format will be left out. Assessment systems created recently might not have been tested for quality. Therefore, formative assessments through various information-gathering methods might be more inclusive. 4. Reschedule data collection for international, regional, and national large-scale assessment until students have regained their routines and learning patterns at school. 5. Provide in-service professional development opportunities for all school stakeholders, such as teachers and special education assistants, amongst others, to form communities of practice. 6. Move from teacher-centred to student-centred learning to engage students. Viewing learning from a student's perspective can help in problem solving and make learning accessible and meaningful. Differentiated learning allows a classroom teacher to teach different groups of students in the classroom in ways that match students' capabilities and learning styles, ensuring that all students learn. Teachers must spend time understanding how their students learn best and their strengths and weaknesses. 7. Involve parents of children with disabilities in their learning plans to increase parent participation and home programming.
	Good practices in the ASEAN region. In Singapore, more than 80% of students with special education needs learn in inclusive classroom settings in mainstream schools, which suggests a whole-school-system approach and attitude towards students with disabilities, including resource supports.
Ministry	**Role of ministries.** Leadership that understands the culture of persons with disabilities and includes them in society can set a positive and holistic tone and support cross-ministerial integration of inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Persons with disabilities have different needs and speeds of learning, and their needs must be honoured. Ministries are uniquely positioned to help as they set the guidelines and policies for public and private schools and religious and secular schools – directly affecting the development of the seven domains of inclusive education.
	1. Eliminate laws or policies that exclude children with disabilities from school. While several countries have adopted a 'zero reject policy', a loose definition of disability and inclusion can lead to students' exclusion. A consistent and well-defined policy to include students will ensure that no student is excluded based on disability 2. Ensure that one ministry is responsible for students of the same age and level of education, including students with and without disabilities. For example, the ministry responsible for early education of children without disabilities should be responsible for early education of children with disabilities; the ministry responsible for primary education of children without disabilities should be responsible for educating children with disabilities. Consistency will help promote inclusion and policymaking that covers all students.

Stakeholder	Recommendations
	3. In a phased approach, reallocate funds that support segregated programming to integrated systems that foster inclusion. 4. Review education policies and approaches to make them inclusive at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels. 5. Provide pre-service and in-service training to all members of the school system, taking a whole-system approach, to strengthen the understanding of neurodiversity in all its forms. Doing so is crucial to persuade stakeholders that students with disabilities have the right to be in mainstream classes in line with UNCRPD commitments. 6. Strengthen national and local programmes to improve the knowledge and skills of families, caregivers, and service providers regarding typical and atypical child development. 7. Encourage early detection of and intervention for children with developmental delays and disabilities. 8. Create inter-ministerial dialogue and policy coherence to offer coordinated services to students with disabilities and their families in their own communities. 9. Conduct regular accessibility audits of school facilities to ensure that all students have access to water and sanitation and equitable access to education materials and teaching methods. 10. Develop and implement pre-service and in-service teaching programmes on inclusive education for education professionals and staff, and encourage networking and knowledge management. 11. Make education data disability-inclusive, including in education management information systems. Pay particular attention to out-of-school children with disabilities who are missed in school data. 12. Promote disability-inclusive and disability-specific sports and cultural programmes to integrate children with disabilities into community-based activities that promote their health and well-being. Enhance community awareness-raising activities to support disability-inclusive sports and cultural programmes.
	Good practice in the ASEAN region. Indonesia's 2019–2024 Master Plan on National Development of Inclusive Education aims to persuade parents, teachers, and other school members to be more open to inclusive learning. To this end, more pre-service teacher education training programmes have adopted an improved curriculum that supports diverse learners in the classroom.

Stakeholder	Recommendations
ASEAN Member States	**Role of ASEAN Member States.** ASEAN Member States should implement recommendations to make primary and secondary schools more inclusive for students with disabilities. The ASEAN Secretariat could form a coalition to encourage collaboration in bringing a whole-of-community approach to the post-COVID-19 recovery, promoting peer learning between countries, and sharing good practices.
	1. Revisit international commitments to inclusive education and incorporate them into regional frameworks that promote regional mechanisms and guidelines. 2. Enhance monitoring and evaluation of the ACRF's goals for inclusive education and ensure mechanisms to implement recommendations, particularly Broad Strategy 2, which includes students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. 3. Encourage lead and other sector bodies to account for their actions. 4. Ensure the implementation of inclusive education goals across all ASEAN Community Pillars by discussing updates at the Coordinating Conference for the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the Committee of the Whole for the ASEAN Economic Community, and the Coordinating Conference on the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. 5. Create disability awareness programming and campaigns to reduce disability taboos. This cultural shift will help improve reporting and data collection and shift national and subnational policies away from segregated models to inclusive models of education.
	Good practice in the ASEAN region. The ACRF Implementation Plan outlines steps that ASEAN Member States can take for a strong recovery; and provides guidance across policy measures and responses, financing and resource mobilisation, institutions and governance mechanisms, stakeholder engagement and partnerships, and effective monitoring.

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ACRF = ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, COVID-19 = coronavirus disease, UNCRPD = United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
Source: Author, based on expert interviews and United Nations (1995), UNESCAP (2018), UNICEF (2020), ASEAN (2020a), and ASEAN (2020b).

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