

Introduction

Everyone should have equal access to housing, healthcare, and social services, and be able to participate fully in public life – to enjoy self-respect and dignity (Sen, 1992). Denial of such rights precedes social exclusion (Evans et al., 2002), widening the gap between groups of people based on variables they did not necessarily choose. Development is inclusive when everyone is healthy, develops their potential, and has meaningful lives (Nussbaum, 2011). Robust health and education systems can strengthen human capital and equalise political capital that would otherwise be determined by inequalities within households.

Teaching methodologies, curriculums, education outcomes, and cultural influences, amongst others, however, vary, and can widen the differences between students with diverse backgrounds. Not all education systems are equal, not all students are the same type of learner, and education systems do not operate in silos as human development is multidimensional. Regardless of where a student attends school, which education policy the school follows, or how its culture impacts learning, every student has the right to receive a good education (UN, 1989) and a chance to contribute to society and develop his or her full social, political, and economic potential.

International efforts to use reliable data to inform policy specific to persons with disabilities were, therefore, distilled by the United Nations in 2008 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Articles 24 and 31 call for the elimination of educational exclusion based on disability, and for reasonable accommodations and disability-specific data and reporting. Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights anchors inclusion in the fundamental human right to education (UN, 1948). The UNCRPD defines disabilities as ‘long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder [a person’s] full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (UN Enable, 2009). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) describes disability as an interaction between a person’s abilities and the environment, such as the national setting and cultural constructions of disability (World Health Organization, 2001), which impact the level of inclusion or exclusion in daily life.

The conventions and the ICF provide the foundation for policy action to include students with disabilities in schools. Inclusive education is intrinsically linked to the political security, economic, and socio-cultural domains. Contrary to the myth that it is more expensive than mainstream education, inclusive education is economically effective and efficient as it uses resources from the system to educate all students instead of taking them from other areas. Not only can no country afford a dual system of education such that there is a mainstream and segregated system, but a dual system is not compatible with Article 24 of the UNCRPD (UNCRPD, 2007). Whilst specialised assessment and specialist intervention may be necessary to assist inclusive education practices in the classroom, the long-term costs of poverty and poor health if students with disabilities are not educated could be much more severe.

Environmental and systemic factors that limit participation in society can lead to health and economic impoverishment. Such is often the case for persons with disabilities, who are disproportionately poorer than those without disability (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], 2018). Being poor and having a disability are linked as one increases the chance of the other (Sen, 2009). Children who have few resources are more cognitively and socio-emotionally impaired than children who have more resources (Dercon and Krishnan, 2009). Persons with disabilities are more excluded than those without disabilities from the labour market. The reasons might be the lack of accommodations and poor understanding in the job market, and unequal preparation and insufficient training of persons with disabilities.

People must be lifted out of poverty to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development (UN, 1995). Equipping schools to be more inclusive benefits everyone, including students who do not have a disability. A common myth is that a student with a disability slows down learning in the classroom. However, exposure to neurodiverse learners provides all students with opportunities to strengthen their communication skills, develop empathy and compassion, and see different perspectives.

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

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Education

Estimates of the number of students with disabilities in ASEAN and East Asia are conservative, as families might experience stigma that prevents them from sharing information about their child's disability, and/or the disability can go undiagnosed if diagnostic services are not readily available or feasible. International reports suggest that about 43.1 million children with disabilities live in East Asia and the Pacific (United Nations Children's Fund [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. In some countries, only 1%–2% of students with disabilities attended school in person before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (UNICEF EAPRO, 2003).

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, 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, no date). 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to many education stakeholders, including students, administrators, and policymakers. Students are being asked to learn independently, which presumes they have the skills for independent learning. However,

many students need feedback from teachers, particularly students with intellectual disabilities. Students who use materials such as learning aids or equipment may not have these resources at home or support to troubleshoot them when they do not work.

The pandemic also brings opportunities as schools re-open. Long-term changes can be implemented at schools, in national policies, and across the region to foster inclusivity. Leadership is critical to enacting these changes, and the report calls on leaders to consider the short- and long-term implications of ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have the means to return to school and receive quality education.