

Chapter 5

Key Findings, Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Chapter 5

Key Findings, Challenges, and Opportunities

Economic, social, and political integration of persons with disabilities will depend on the bridge between learners and their communities. The connection requires openness and a positive attitude to neurodiverse learners in the classroom; learners must gain the skills and competencies to integrate into society fully and meaningfully.

All the ASEAN and East Asian countries covered in this report aspire to create inclusive education systems. The countries are committed to international and regional agreements, national and sub-national 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.

Eight of the 10 ASEAN countries have endorsed the Southeast Asia Teachers Competency Framework (SEA-TCF),¹ which showcases their commitment to incorporating competencies such as equity, respect for diversity, and learner-centred pedagogy into national standards for teachers, recruitment, and professional development. The SEA-TCF represents a set of 21st-century behaviours, skills, attributes, and knowledge with which teachers need to equip students to propel the region's economic growth. The SEA-TCF can connect the ASEAN community and expedite teacher exchange and teacher mobility within the region (Teacher's Council of Thailand, 2018).

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. The SEA-TCF seeks to improve teachers' skill sets and attitudes to students with disabilities.

Whilst Myanmar has endorsed the SEA-TCF, it is the only ASEAN member without a formal definition of inclusive education, which is an important step to using a common language in national and local frameworks and policies. Whilst all AMSs mention inclusive education in their policies and frameworks, the region lacks fully inclusive school systems. Many countries believe their educational systems are inclusive, but their education practices are either integrated or segregated.

Achieving the common vision of fully inclusive schools faces several challenges and opportunities. One challenge is the definition of disability. Whilst 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.

¹ Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam (UNICEF, 2020).

The number of clinicians in urban centres and especially in rural areas is insufficient to diagnose children and recommend early intervention strategies to families. Access to services and knowledge of how to obtain a diagnosis and treatment is varied, and cultural stigma can prevent families from seeking support and lead to missing data on students with disabilities. Awareness campaigns such as those in Malaysia have reduced stigma and build communities that include those who are often unseen or unheard.

Collecting sufficient data on children with disabilities and the barriers they face remains a challenge. Children with disabilities need to be represented in the data to build inclusive systems. Attempts to strengthen data collection are numerous. Singapore 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 to 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 UNCPRD definition of disability. The Washington Group questions can inform a social model of 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.

Underdiagnosis and medical model diagnosis of a disability prevent data-informed understanding of disability and influence policymakers' language and mindset. Robust data collection methods are needed to target students who require support and bring the information to policymakers. They must understand the culture of a person with a disability to ensure that policies not only provide access to services such as education but also demonstrate an understanding that a student with disability faces several barriers that hinder economic integration and political participation.

Whilst many teachers, parents, and policymakers think that inclusion is important, they might not be fully familiar with neurodiverse learning and principles of inclusion such as whole-system inclusion, the role of learning-friendly environment, how to adapt a curriculum to student needs, differential learning, and 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 country's leadership has the power to set the tone for a cultural shift towards inclusion. Leaders must be inclusive themselves, publicly use inclusive language, and advocate for the human rights of all their constituents, including those with disabilities. Leaders can raise the public's awareness of not only social inclusion of students and persons with disabilities but also the political and economic barriers students with disabilities face later.

A common challenge across ASEAN members 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. Whilst 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. 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.

Many ASEAN countries might wait until they are developed before reforming education to include students with disabilities. But the countries can take many steps towards inclusivity now. One of the strongest catalysts for inclusive education is a shift in attitude: if education stakeholders believe that students with disabilities belong in the classroom, they can use creative ways to include them that do not always require expensive technology or hours of writing individual education plans. For example, if students have a vision impairment, seating them in front of the class is an effective strategy to include them in the classroom.