



Promoting the inclusion of children and young people
with disabilities in education in the Arab region:

An analysis of existing developments, challenges and opportunities

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▼ A schoolboy with disability smiling at camera in hall against black background

Foreword

Education is a fundamental human right and it must be inclusive, so that no one is marginalized within -or excluded from - education, and no one is left behind.

Education has been recognized as the main driver of development, and an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal no.4 (SDG 4) aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

The following report highlights the progress achieved and the progress still required for inclusive quality education to become a full reality in the Arab Region, specifically with reference to children and young people living with disabilities.

The case studies illustrated in the report demonstrate some important efforts, such as capacity development in primary and secondary education and education voucher programmes. These and other positive initiatives support the ambition of a truly transformation towards inclusive education in the Arab Region.

For the full realization of SDG 4 to happen and for the transformative education to lead to a better future, all stakeholders, from Governments to the private sector to communities and individuals, must be proactively engaged to ensure an inclusive education for all, because every learner matters and matters equally.

Costanza Farina

Director of UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States
UNESCO Representative to Lebanon and Syria

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UNESCO reports fall within its continuous contributions to a global debate on education and may not necessarily reflect its policies or approaches. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors, they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of inclusive education in the Arabic speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in order to make recommendations for future actions. Whilst the report has a particular focus on persons with disabilities, it recognises that other groups of learners are marginalised within or excluded from educational provision. The main key messages made in this report are as follows:

- Since late last century, a number of countries across the Arab region have devised laws that emphasise the rights of persons with disabilities in different aspects of society. Some countries have also developed national strategies in promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities in education. However, the definition of 'inclusive education' is still largely absent from national policies and documentation, and policies supporting inclusion practices at the government, district and school levels remain scarce. This lack of direction makes it difficult to develop teaching and learning environments that are inclusive.
- Internationally there is an increased emphasis on the importance of building educational systems, schools and classrooms that are equitable and inclusive for all children and young people, including those with disabilities. In moving forward with this agenda, UNESCO guidance suggests that inclusion and equity should be seen as principles that inform all education policies, rather being seen as a separate policy.
- Barriers facing inclusion are numerous and can be environmental, financial, attitudinal and institutional. Whilst such barriers exist globally, those that are associated with the availability of qualified teachers, allocation of teaching and financial resources, and the ineffectiveness of existing training and legislation are more prevalent in less developed countries. Issues related to safety, security and poverty are additional barriers confronting inclusion in the region, especially in rural and suburban areas, as well as in areas affected by humanitarian crises.
- Strengthening educational systems requires partnerships and collaboration between all those involved in education in order to make best use of existing resources, whether human, physical or material. This requires a national education strategy for promoting equity and inclusion that draws on existing resources to reform educational systems. The absence of clarity and consistency will mean that some learners continue to be excluded, or denied equitable education.
- Creating inclusive schools is likely to require re-thinking of the roles of everyone involved, including the responsibilities of those at ministry, district and school levels, and communities. National teacher education programmes must build the capacities of practitioners to teach inclusively; regional supervisors will need to supervise and advise in line with inclusion principles; and head teachers have to lead a policy for inclusion within their schools.
- Despite the growing awareness of the importance and need for equity and inclusion for all learners, including those with disabilities, within the Arab region more awareness campaigns are needed, especially in rural and suburban places, to increase awareness of parents, children with and without disabilities, and local communities about the importance of education on their lives. Building awareness amongst educators of what inclusion means, and how it can be reflected in the classroom, school and community is of equal importance. This is reflected in UNESCO's call for all involved in education to be aligned with the meaning of inclusion and to build a shared vision of how inclusion can be reproduced in practice in their contexts.
- The involvement of all concerned parties, including children and their parents, in decision making is vital. This is often overlooked in existing literature on the Arab region. Strengthening collaboration among educators and schools, and indeed parents and schools as partners on the journey of their children's education helps

change attitudes towards learner differences, as well as making inclusive education more attainable.

- To be most effective, this collaboration needs to be imbedded in structures, with the aim of building positive collaboration between different ministries, as well as between schools and parents, and schools and local communities.
- Headteachers and other educators need to share experiences with one another in relation to what strategies they have applied and how well they worked. To do so, schools, districts and ministries need to provide suitable platforms for teachers to share best practices and support them in sharing their experiences about what accommodations have been implemented, what worked, and what results they have generated. Several collaboration strategies, such as mutual observations, coaching and 'lesson study', can be applied in support of building professional collaborative approaches among teachers, and support and empower them to reach all their learners.
- As far as the physical environment is concerned, schools need to allow access for all learners to the school and its educational facilities. Schools may need to put access plans in place to improve access for all. Having a policy that makes it mandatory for all schools to apply the universal standards of inclusive design from the design stage of the building should lead to increased accessibility and remove barriers associated to the physical environment.
- Collaboration can also take place between schools, such as between high and low performing government schools, or between private and government schools, to support one another and work together to improve the quality of education offered. Similar to building collaboration between educators, collaboration between schools must be structured and systematically applied.

In conclusion, this report urges governments to take measures to put the education of learners with disabilities under the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education. It also recommends that ministries of education should allocate adequate resources and to draw actionable plans to bring an end to the segregation of provision and ensure a nation-wide commitment to inclusive education of all. This approach is summed up in UNESCO guidance published in 2017 by the statement: 'Every learner matters and matters equally'. The implication of this is that a strategy for promoting inclusion and equity can provide a pathway to educational excellence.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Introduction



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Four hands protecting disabled Icon

1.1 Setting the scene

One of UNESCO's core missions is to provide regional and global leadership to drive progress and strengthen existing educational systems so that they are accountable to the education of all their learners. UNESCO's work is based on the belief that education is a basic human right for all learners regardless of their differences, abilities and disabilities, and that for all to really mean all, education must then be equitable and inclusive. In so doing, education must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of its learners and ensure the equitable access and participation of all.

Inspired by its commitment, in November 2018, UNESCO offices of Beirut, Egypt and Paris organized a regional seminar on the topic of inclusive education. The seminar was held in Cairo, Egypt, and aimed to raise the profile of inclusive education in the Arab region through promoting a rights-based approach to education. It also intended to contribute to the preparation of UNESCO's International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education, which was planned to take place in Cali, Colombia in September 2019.

The Cairo seminar marked UNESCO's renewed commitment to promoting equity and inclusion in education for all including those with disabilities in

the Arab region. It furthermore contributed to goal four of the 2030 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) concerned with ensuring 'INCLUSIVE and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for ALL.' Given the growing humanitarian situation in several countries of the region, which undoubtedly exacerbated existing educational challenges, the Cairo seminar and UNESCO's work in the Arab region has had a particular focus on those in conflict or post-conflict contexts.

In preparation for the Cairo seminar, in 2016, UNESCO's regional office of Beirut commissioned a literature review of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region along with five country case studies to explore the status of inclusive education in each of Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Oman and Sudan. Broadly speaking, these studies aimed to explore inclusive education in the named countries through reflecting on barriers, enablers and success stories associated with country specific contexts. These case studies which were presented and discussed at the Cairo seminar, provided UNESCO with working documents to assist their subsequent work in inclusive education, including the development of the current synthesis report.

1.2 Purpose and aims of this report

The current synthesis report seeks to offer an overview of inclusive education in the Arabic speaking countries of the MENA region, referred to in this report as ‘the Arab region’. It has a particular focus on persons with disabilities, whilst also recognising that other groups of learners are marginalised within or excluded from educational provision.

Using UNESCO’s 2017 Equity and Inclusion Assessment Framework, this report reflects on how existing concepts, policies, structures, systems and practices related to disability equity and inclusion are being interpreted and applied in the Arab region. With this in mind, the report aims to:

- Shed light on issues associated to equity and inclusion across the Arab region.
- Unpack the meaning of inclusion, and offer an overview of existing barriers and approaches associated to equity and inclusion in education in the region.
- Reflect on existing trends towards inclusion policy and practices in the Arab region and globally.
- Elevate and advance the work on inclusive education accomplished by UNESCO in the Arab region through developing the current synthesis report and offering some policy recommendations regarding moving forward with inclusion
- Support policy makers, educators and others concerned with equity and inclusion in education to rethink their approaches, practices, and associated policies in order to scale up inclusion in education for all in their respective countries on a nation-wide level.

1.3 Information for this report

Information for this report is drawn from a literature review and five case studies commissioned by UNESCO Beirut and conducted between 2016 and 2018. Literature and additional statistical information are drawn from UNESCO, and other United Nations publications as well as several academic databases accessible through University College London,



Institute of Education. Further to this, the report draws on the personal and professional experiences of the author who has lived and professional experiences associated to inclusion, disability and education in the Arab region and internationally.

Chapter 2

Overview on

Inclusive Education

2. Overview on Inclusive Education

2.1 An overview of inclusive education globally including in the Arab region

Since the last century, a number of conventions, treaties and conferences have been held in promotion of the rights of all to education. This encompasses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and the Incheon Declaration (2015) and its framework for action.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) asserts that children with disabilities have the right to receive their education in mainstream settings. SDG4 further asserts that countries must 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning for all'. Accordingly, inclusion is no longer considered a choice, but a must, and signatory countries should work towards aligning their policies, structures and practices in line with inclusion and equity principles.

Regarding this, some scholars argue that special settings can be a suitable option for learners whom mainstream settings are not yet prepared to include. However, having built an inclusive teaching and learning environment in mainstream settings, special settings would only retain those with complex and profound needs. Inclusive advocates support the principles of creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment that can welcome all regardless of their differences. To this end, they assert that the role special schools play may change. Examples of their continued use in an inclusive system might be as resource centres in support of the inclusion of all in mainstream schools, to provide specialist educational support for educators, parents and children alike, such as speech therapy, social and independent skills.

Simultaneously, UNESCO (2017) advocates for changing the role of mainstream school teachers from one that only instructs to one that can actively involve learners in their learning process. In doing so, learners would become more engaged in their teaching and learning and education would become more relevant to their needs. Some children nonetheless, may still require some accommodations in order for them to reach the learning objectives required of them. These accommodations can be provided inside or outside of the classroom, in or out of school hours. Examples include offering additional time during assessments, explanations before or after the session, or providing additional exercises to practice at home. Some children may still be unable to follow the general curriculum and reach the same learning objectives required from others at same age or grade. These children instead may need a curriculum that is tailored to their individual needs, and/or additional or supplementary objectives in developing core skills or knowledge not needed or already acquired by others. As explained below, having an individual education programme and/or plan is useful to ensure that these students can also graduate with the skills they need to become independent citizens.

Historically, special schools existed to offer education for children deemed uneducable in mainstream settings. Hence, these children were, to a large extent, excluded from mainstream education. Prior to the formation of these special schools, they were largely excluded from education all together. Then, globally, in the mid-twentieth century, the education of children in special and segregated environments started to be questioned on human rights, equity and education effectiveness principles (Ainscow, 2020). Advocacy for the rights of those children to receive their education in mainstream settings then started to emerge in the Arab region, although when and how differs widely from country to country. Indeed, in response to the need to educate these children in mainstream settings, some ministries such as those of Morocco, Oman, Egypt and Iraq, started to establish special classes for them in mainstream government schools during the early

twenty-first century. In this way, these children mostly remained in segregated settings, but within mainstream schools.

The presence of these children in mainstream settings, even in separate classes has been referred to as 'inclusion'. In Oman and Iraq, for example, these classes were named 'inclusive classes', which may indicate how the term 'inclusive education' was understood and applied. Having special classes located in mainstream schools often meant that these classes were being taught by special teachers, and that these special teachers have their special education supervisors that are different from those of regular classrooms. This reproduced the specialised, but parallel system of special education experienced with special schools, allowing limited interaction between the two systems despite their increased proximity. Significantly, this meant that the presence of these children in these schools did not introduce changes to the education that took place in mainstream classes in terms of either what is taught, how it is taught or how the occurred education is assessed. Indeed, referring to the education of a group of children in separate classes to mean inclusion, instead of introducing change to the educational system constitutes a major barrier to building an inclusive educational system.

Whilst the importance of including children with disabilities in mainstream education is gaining momentum across the Arab region, research concerned with the inclusion of children with disabilities is still relatively scarce. The literature that is available nonetheless shows that in spite of inclusion being a stated aim of many governments in the region, what is actually implemented largely reflects a process of segregation, as described above, or integration. This latter concept means that it is left for children with disabilities to adapt themselves to and manage as best they can within the existing system, with limited or no support, as reported by researchers in Jordan (Abu-Hamour & Al-Hmouz, 2014), the United Arab Emirates (Alborno and Gaad 2014), Oman and Lebanon (Gaad, 2011; Khochen-Bagshaw 2020).

Since the last quarter of last century, a number of initiatives have been implemented in different countries of the region aimed at increasing the dropout rate and increasing the enrolment rate of

children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups of learners. International and private organisations, rather than government, have tended to lead these initiatives and much of the progress made on the road to inclusive education in the region. However, despite the progress made, a number of these initiatives did not result in sustainable inclusive practices in schools. For example, although a number of interventions targeted teacher education with the aim of supporting teachers to teach inclusively, they were not accompanied by the necessary structural changes for them to transform the wider teaching and learning environment. However, building the capacities of teachers needs to be part of building a whole school approach to inclusion, as teachers operate within a series of nested systems, meaning many factors may influence teaching in the classroom, such as the human, material, financial and physical resources (UNESCO, 2017). The availability or lack of these resources is related to the school and its environment, to the community and attitudes towards disability within which the school exists, and from a system that is not designed with equity and inclusion for all in mind.

Initially in the Arab region, the ministries of social affairs, which have slightly different roles and titles across the region, took responsibility for the establishment of the 'special needs' sectors including the care and education of those with disabilities and 'special needs'. However, given that education is the speciality and indeed responsibility of the ministries of education, the responsibility for the education of these learners in mainstream schools has shifted to the ministries of education in several countries, including Oman, Egypt and Sudan. Nevertheless, ministries of social affairs remain in charge of persons with disabilities in special schools in many other countries, including Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria. Whilst meeting the needs of persons with disabilities in mainstream settings would require coordination and partnership between a number of ministries, such as those of health, transportation, higher education and social affairs, in an equitable system, the responsibility for the education of all learners, regardless of differences, should be purely the responsibility of the ministry of education (UNESCO 2017).

2.2 Types of schools and existing forms of education for those with disabilities

The types of schools available vary across the Arab region. Generally speaking, schools can be government or private. There are also private schools that are government subsidised, schools for refugees such as those of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), special schools that cater for certain types of disabilities, and informal educational programmes for those who do not progress or continue with regular education, or those who return to education after being out of education. Some of these programmes are complementary to that received in mainstream education, others supplementary, and others may take the form of accelerated education for those who missed out on their education due to displacement, school closure or who never been enrolled in education. Vocational education also exists, very often as a path parallel to mainstream education for those who complete lower secondary education but do not proceed to upper secondary. In the Arab region, it is generally believed that vocational education attracts those who are not academically able so they can gain skills in support of joining the labour market.

The following forms of education are common for the education of children with disabilities and/or those requiring support provision in the region:

- **Special schools:** these schools, or institutions as they are still called in some countries, offer education for those who share a type of disability/difficulty in the same setting. Very often these schools cater for those who have visible disabilities/difficulties such as hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities.
- **Special classrooms:** these are classes located in mainstream schools that cater for a group of learners deemed unsuitable for mainstream settings. Some of these classes are for children who share a type of difficulty, others for all those with disabilities attending the school or who are at a similar educational level, different from those attending mainstream settings.
- **Resource rooms:** some mainstream schools have resource rooms, a room that offers some children with educational needs support

as one-to-one or small group tuitions that may take their individual capacities into consideration. Education in resource rooms can be supplementary or parallel to that taking place in the mainstream classroom.

- **Mainstream classrooms:** some children with disabilities attend mainstream classrooms alongside their peers without a disability, but are left to manage as best as they can. This means that they are integrated rather than included in these classrooms and do not receive their education at an equitable level to others.
- **Inclusive schools:** these schools seek to adopt inclusion policy and practices and aspire to be inclusive learning environments. Some of them nevertheless focus on the inclusion of certain types of disabilities rather than on all, which may jeopardise the meaning of inclusion. Very often, these schools are part of a wider project aimed at developing the school to become an inclusive school in the future.

The enrolment of children with disabilities in vocational education and in other forms of informal education is still under-researched across the Arab region. Statistical information regarding persons with disabilities enrolled in vocational education, what courses they attend and what types of disabilities and support needs they have been near non-existent.

Having offered an overview of inclusive education followed by a snapshot of existing types of schools and forms of education for children with disabilities in the region, the report will now reflect on the way inclusion related concepts are understood and referred to in the Arab context.

Chapter 3

Integration *versus*

Inclusion in Education

3. Integration *versus* Inclusion in Education



▼ Portrait of a mother and her beloved son with disability in rehabilitation center captured in a soulful moment

3.1 Key concepts and definitions

The interest in inclusive education is growing globally including in the Arab region. Inclusion, nevertheless, is a contested term defined differently by different scholars. Variations in defining the term also vary from country to country and indeed inside a country. Its practices may also differ between organizations at local, regional, and national levels. Existing definitions look at the term from a moral perspective, others from rights, educational or social perspectives (Norwich, 2013). Nevertheless, it is becoming more widely recognised that inclusion, as a concept, should be concerned with all students, regardless of their differences, gender, socio economic background, abilities, or disabilities.

Although different actors have different understandings of inclusion, a common focus on disability persists in the Arab region (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Given the limited country level documentation defining inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020), this suggests that any commonality in opinion is therefore likely a reflection of those held in the wider society. Equally, some scholars and practitioners, still use the term 'inclusion' to refer to children attending segregated units located in mainstream classes, or being placed in mainstream classrooms to manage as best they can with no or limited support. In the latter context, children are included on the grounds that children themselves need to change in order for them to succeed, or more commonly survive, in a largely unchanged mainstream educational environment.

Including children in mainstream settings and leaving them to manage the demands of education with no or limited support reflects the applications of 'integration'. As a concept, integration, is often used interchangeably with the concept of 'inclusion' in the Arab region (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). In addition, 'inclusive education' has been translated to Arabic in a number of ways, and scholars tend to use these terminologies interchangeably. Indeed, there is no unified terminology across the region or even between many countries, despite commonality in the spoken language. This discrepancy in the terminologies used in the region inevitably influences how they are manifest in policy and practice and points to a need to unify the use of concepts such as 'inclusive education' on a country and regional levels.



▼ Symbol for a better inclusion. Hand turns dice and changes the word exclusion to inclusion

3.2 The differences between integration and inclusion in education

Integration occurs when learners described as having 'special educational needs' are placed in mainstream education settings with few or without adaptations and resources, on condition that they can adapt themselves to pre-existing structures, attitudes and environments (UNESCO, 2017). Such an approach may lead to children with disabilities to be physically present in a school, but without having full and equitable access to the educational environment. This often results in their leaving education before the completion of its mandatory stages.

Inclusion, on the other hand refers to 'a system reform that aims at welcoming all learners who are vulnerable to exclusionary pressures because of age, gender, economic situation, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability' (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). It involves:

- Acknowledging the right of children to an education near where they live.
- Acknowledging that everybody in the school is equally important.
- Increasing participation of children in, and reducing their exclusion from, what is taught and the life cycle of the school.

- Reducing barriers that prevent children from benefiting from teaching and building friendships in their schools.
- Rebuilding the way people think, rules, regulations and things that happen in school, so it can serve all children from the local area.
- Learning from attempts to overcome barriers to access and participation and make changes everybody can benefit from.
- Using the differences between children as resources to support learning, rather than seeing them as problems to be overcome.
- Improving schools for staff as well as children.
- Schools are about building community and developing values, as well as increasing achievement.
- Schools and communities working together and helping each other.
- Recognizing that inclusion in education is an aspect of inclusion in society.

(Booth and Ainscow, 2011).

UNESCO (2017) further defines inclusion in education to mean:

“ A process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners. ”

(UNESCO, 2017)

This clearly demonstrates that UNESCO considers inclusion to be a continuous process concerned with identifying and removing barriers within particular contexts, and that inclusion means not only access to education, but also the equitable participation of all children therein. When learners access and participate in the offered education, this will inevitably positively impact their achievement (Farrell, 2006). In this way, it is argued, moves to promote inclusion have the potential to stimulate changes that will benefit many, if not all students, within a school (Ainscow, 2020).

Central to access and participation is that learning takes place in inclusive classrooms through an inclusive curriculum. One purpose of a curriculum is to equip learners with the knowledge and skills required to graduate, and to become effective and independent members of their societies (Kelly, 2009). Very often educators on school, district or government levels in the Arab region define ‘learning’ in a narrow sense to refer to the ‘acquisition of knowledge presented by a teacher’ (UNESCO, 2017), or the books, teacher guides and syllabi that specifies required competencies and objectives learners need to achieve.

To build inclusive curricula, and indeed inclusive classrooms, educators in the Arab region need to approach the curriculum from a broader sense. An inclusive curriculum should not only refer to the content of what can be taught, but also the strategies or methods of teaching that can be used when teaching it and the methods of assessment adopted along the way. In an inclusive setting, therefore, not all learners need to receive the same instructions in the same way or at the same time. Teachers do not need to, or should not, use one



▼ A cheerful child boy with disability at a rehabilitation center for kids with special needs

method of teaching in their lessons or assessing learning. Instead, learners can work at different paces and in different ways following a common framework of objectives and activities that respond to their individual needs and capacities (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). In this context, the teacher’s role is to facilitate the learning that takes place, allowing learners to be active participants in their learning. In the Arab region, therefore, a shift in the understanding of what these concepts mean to an equity and inclusion perspective is necessary. This would be greatly helped by all concerned individuals sharing common understandings of what these terms and their applications in practice really mean, as well as the codification of those definitions by developing supportive policy.

Chapter 4

Data Associated with Inclusion

4. Data Associated with Inclusion

One of the greatest barriers to inclusive education in the Arab region is the poor information management systems available to offer decision makers with the information they require to make informed decisions and to be able to monitor and track the progress of their initiatives. For example, whilst the United Nations' estimate that 10% to 15% globally are living with a disability (WHO, 2021), the reported prevalence of disability in the Arab region ranges from 0.19% in Qatar to 5.07% in Morocco (UNESCWA, 2017a). This may suggest that the rate of those with disabilities enrolled in education may not accurately reflect the population of people with disabilities because, even including those who drop out, available data may not record those who have never been enrolled or are perhaps not identified as being disabled. What existing statistics do tell us, however, is that those with a disability are significantly

less likely to attend school than those without a disability. For example, in the case study countries of Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Oman and Sudan those with a disability are 27.27%, 19.97%, 23.62%, 26.24% and 18.99% respectively less likely to attend school than those without a disability (UNESCWA, 2017a).

Having accurate data that reflects reality and can therefore aid governments and policy makers to plan and track progress towards and within inclusive education effectively is pressing across the region. Educational systems must be strengthened so to be able to gather data about those who are in education, those who are out of education and those at risk of dropping out. Having data about the types and severity of disabilities, and provisions required, would also support mobilising resources where they are most needed.

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▼ Mom communicating with deaf daughter focus on kid sitting on couch in living room make fingers shape hands talking nonverbal. Hearing loss deaf disability person sign language learning school concept

4.1 Barriers to inclusion

Globally, barriers facing inclusion are numerous and can be environmental, financial, attitudinal and institutional (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Whilst attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers are recognised as facing the movement towards inclusion globally, those that are associated to the availability of qualified teachers, allocation of teaching and financial resources and the ineffectiveness of existing training and legislation are more prevalent in less developed countries (Damaj, 2014; Khochen & Radford, 2012). Issues related to safety, security and poverty are additional barriers confronting inclusion in the region, especially in rural and suburban areas, as well as in areas affected by humanitarian crises.

4.1.1 Attitudinal barriers

Positive attitudes towards disability are considered a driver for inclusion, whilst negative attitudes play a major role in marginalising or excluding some students. Positive attitudes therefore constitute the first step on the journey of inclusion. When people are positive about inclusion, they seek ways to identify and remove existing barriers that hinder learners from achieving their potential.

Whilst advocates for inclusion have started to emerge in the Arab region, negative attitudes from teachers, parents, headteachers and students themselves are still evident in existing research and the conducted country case studies. Many teachers and headteachers believe that they do not possess the necessary skills, resources or the responsibility to teach children with disabilities in their classes and schools; some parents of children with disabilities do not consider the education of their children with disabilities important; and many parents of children without disabilities believe that children with disabilities take a lot of teachers' attentions to the detriment of their own children. This reflects the persistence of stigma towards persons with disabilities in the communities where they reside, which is manifest in some parents hiding their children with disabilities to avoid their exposure to the local community, as revealed in the case studies from Egypt and Palestine.

4.1.2 Environmental barriers

The accessibility of the physical environment has been shown to create barriers towards inclusion in the Arab region by a number of scholars. Having classes in higher floors of a building with no facilities to allow access to those parts of the school, combined with limited availability of accessible bathrooms, wide doors and corridors, were revealed to restrict many persons with disabilities from accessing schools in the case studies from Egypt, Sudan and Palestine. Some countries have taken measures to improve accessibilities of the physical environment of their schools, but challenges persist especially, but not exclusively, in relation to older schools.

Case studies from the region reveal that the general curriculum may create barriers to the education of those on the autistic spectrum disorder, or those with learning difficulties who are not able to progress academically with the same objectives and level of education as others of same age. In these cases, the lack of assistive tools, teaching resources and human resources to support teachers to reach all their learners have been additionally noted to be problematic across the region.

Very often teacher training is conducted out of school working hours, making attending them be overwhelming for many teachers with families and other responsibilities. Teachers who support children with disabilities are also often paid poorly. Together, the demanding nature of teaching all, but without the training, support or resources to do so, and poor financial incentives, deter many teachers from engaging with the field of inclusion either academically or in their practice. This has contributed to a lack of expertise in the field of inclusion in the region and constitutes a major barrier to its progress.

4.1.3 Institutional barriers

Case studies from Palestine, Egypt and Sudan reveal examples of headteachers denying entry to children deemed not educable in their schools. Research from the region further indicates that it is in the hands of headteachers to accept or deny entry to children to their schools (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Whilst such decisions are often officially justified as being the result of the school lacking the provisions to support



those children's needs, there is also a sentiment, demonstrated in the Sudan case study and elsewhere in the literature, that in a climate of fierce competition between schools ranked on national league tables, some schools refuse a child with disabilities entry on the basis of fear of lowering their scores. At the same time, the heavy content of the curriculum that teachers are required to complete by the end of a scholastic year may also lead teachers to deprioritise the needs of those who are different (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2019).

All of this indicates that existing schooling systems across the region are designed to meet the needs of those who are similar. Whilst they do not allow teachers the flexibility to meet the individual needs of learners, they do allow head teachers the flexibility to exclude learners they regard as 'not educable'. This clearly promotes exclusionary and hinders inclusionary practices at the school level, as is demonstrated in each of the case studies from Morocco, Oman, Sudan, Egypt and Palestine. School wide practices such as these are often mirrored in the legislative landscape which states the right of all for education, but rarely contains any mechanisms to

enforce their enrolment. This results in many parents, at least those who have the means to, sending their children to private schools, creating further division between them and those who cannot afford to do so.

4.1.4 Legislative barriers

The right to access education for all children at all levels is enshrined in every national constitution across the Arab region. All countries of the Arab region have signed the CRPD and some have ratified it. In doing so, these countries not only agree with its requirements, but adhere to developing their policy and practices in line with its requirements, including the rights of persons with disabilities to attend mainstream schools. However, the nature of education in this commitment, how that right includes everyone, regardless of differences or disabilities, and how it will be enforced is often unclear. In some cases, education policies in the region still contradict the commitment to the right for all children to access education by, for example, barring entry to schooling education for learners on the grounds of the severity and multiplicity of

disability. In Egypt, for example, existing policies allow only those with mild disabilities to attend mainstream education, and those with multiple disabilities are prohibited from entering both mainstream and special education in Iraq. Other examples of existing policies that contribute to the poor enforcement of the mandatory education for all children are 'repetition policies' that allow learners to repeat the same grade twice before being automatically excluded from education, and 'failing policies' that fail some learners during basic education instead of considering the barriers for their education caused by the educational environment.

4.1.5 Financial barriers

Over the last decade, government financial allocations for education have been restricted across a number of countries of the region, including Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan, due to the wider financial constraints these countries have faced. For example, education expenditure fell by 2.8% in Iraq between 2018 and 2019 (World Bank Group 2021) and as much as 7.0% in Lebanon between 2019 and 2020 (Republic of Lebanon Ministry of Finance 2020).

The allocation of finance for building inclusive classrooms and meeting the needs of persons with disabilities has, when counted for, been even more restricted. However, allocated budgets rarely account for the professional development educators need before and during service, and the accommodations some students with disabilities need. This financial constrains also impacts the number of available schools and an insufficient number of government schools has led to increasingly large class sizes in a number of countries, including Sudan, Egypt and Iraq. This can be problematic for teachers and learners generally, and for learners with disabilities, for whom the increased noise or distance from the teacher might be problematic, in particular. Shortage of funding therefore remains a major barrier to inclusion.

4.1.6 Geographical location and safety related barriers

The location of schools on highways, in fields or crowded locations, may make them difficult to reach for children generally, girls in particular and even more so for children with disabilities. Equally, the shortage of accessible transportation systems and uneven roads prevents many persons with disabilities to independently and safely reach school in many countries in the region, such as Syria, Palestine, Sudan, Iraq and Egypt. Alternatively, the distance to the nearest school in rural parts of the region may further deny entry to schools for those who are not provided or do not possess the means to make the journey, and the lack of safety in areas of Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Sudan may not allow many parents to send their children to schools.

Existing studies very often only reveal barriers facing those with visible disabilities. For example, a study into inclusive education in Egypt identifies access related barriers facing those with hearing and visual impairments, such as the unavailability of sign language and Braille materials, as well as the inability of teachers to work with those using a Braille curriculum. Issues related to learners with invisible difficulties, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia, are very often overlooked when discussing issues related to inclusion in the region. Indeed, scholars (e.g. Norwich, 2013) suggest that this group of students may constitute nearly 10% of the school population, of which nearly 60% of them may be able to manage their learning difficulties when provided with the appropriate support.

Together, these barriers to inclusion generally and the inclusion of children with disabilities in particular, impact the enrolment and retention of children affected by them. As such, school attendance, enrolment and retention rates are useful tools with which to examine how inclusive a school system is.

4.2 School attendance

The issue of enrolment and dropout is another pressing issue in the Arab region. The SDG4 calls on countries to provide quality, equitable and inclusive education for all their learners. Signatory countries must therefore ensure by 2030 that primary and secondary education in their respective countries is free, and publicly funded for twelve years of school education. Of these, there should be at least nine years of compulsory schooling education. So where does the issue of school attendance stand in the Arab region?

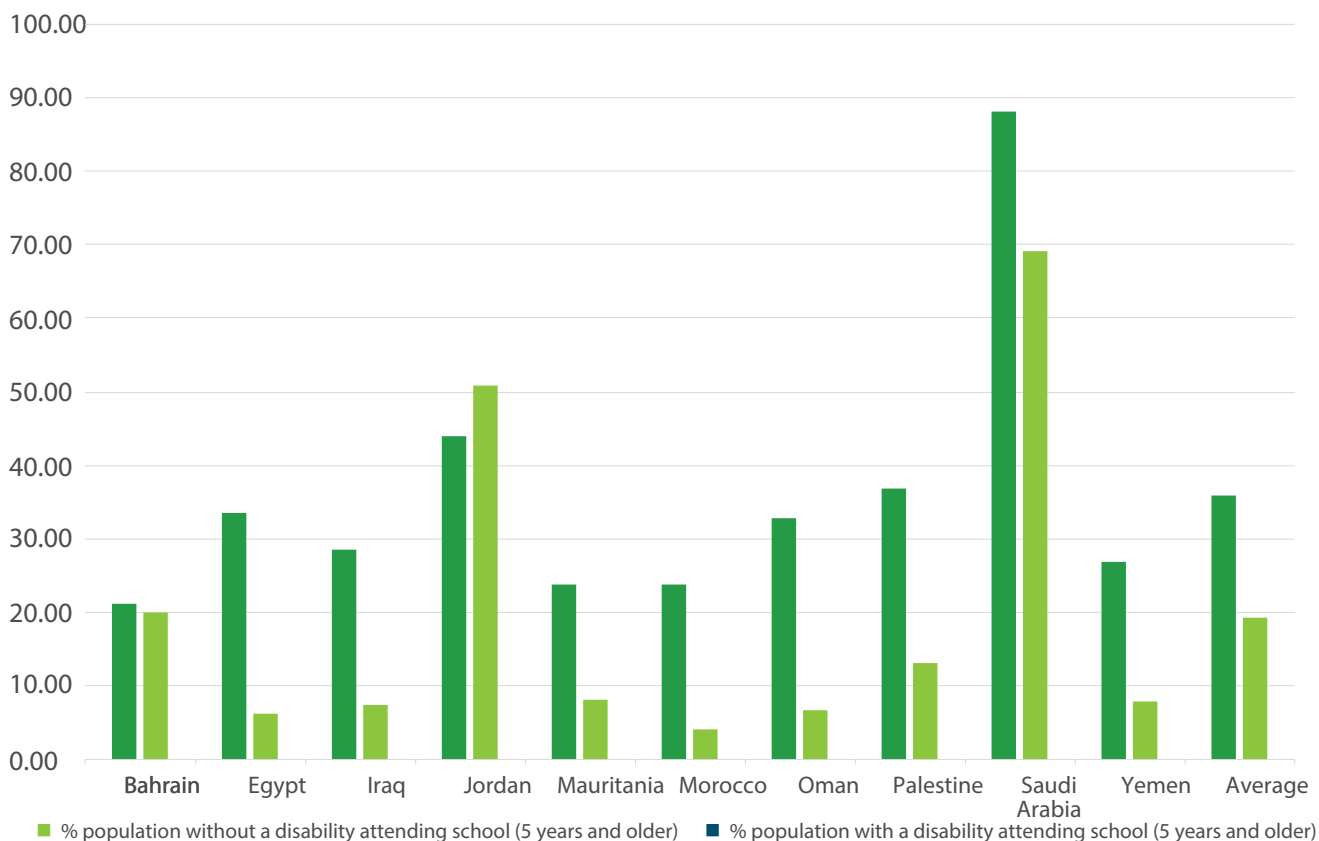
Dropout before the completion of mandatory education is still very prevalent in countries of the global South, and across the Arab region. The phenomenon, however, does not affect all equally. UNESCO (2018) asserts that children with disabilities, nomads and refugees are among the most educationally excluded groups in the region. Although interest in the reasons leading to some children dropping out of education has

started to grow, there remains limited research available regarding the rate of dropout of those with disabilities. Equally, there is limited research regarding applied interventions and their effectiveness on reducing the rate of dropout and increasing enrolment of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

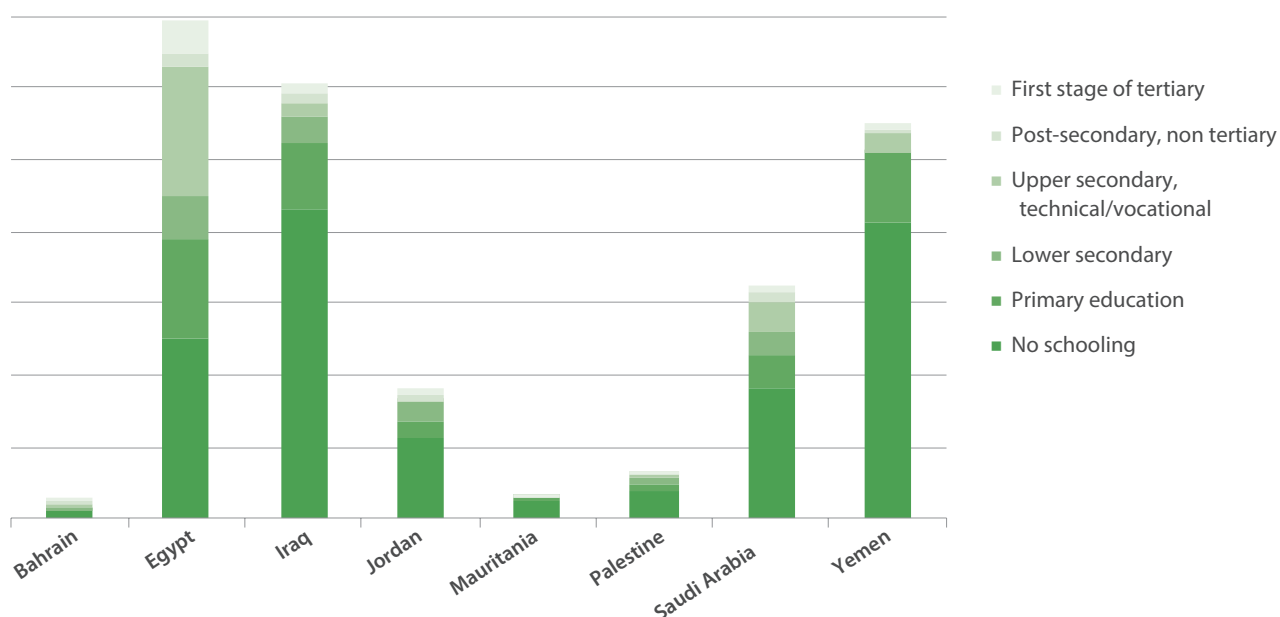
According to UNESCO (2020b), there are approximately 58 million children not enrolled in primary education worldwide and approximately 100 million more that did not complete the mandatory stage of education. In the Arab region, UNICEF (2020) estimates only 74 percent of students from the poorest quintile and 95 percent from the richest quintile completed their primary education in 2019.

National data collected from ten countries across the region (UNESCWA, 2017a; 2018) shows that persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to attend school than those without disabilities in most countries in the region. As shown in figure 1, this difference is greater than 15% in eight of the ten countries.

Figure 1. Percentage of population with a disability attending school compared to percentage of population without a disability attending school



Source: (UNESCWA, 2017b)

Figure 2. Persons with disabilities educational attainment by grade

Source: (UNESCWA, 2017b)

The same data shows that a large proportion of persons with disabilities, the majority in many countries, in the region do not attain any schooling qualification. And, as illustrated in figure 2, their attainment, and indeed presence in education, tends to decrease by educational stage. This is reflected by the rate of literacy in the Arab region being much lower for persons with disabilities than for persons without disabilities. This gap is biggest in Oman, where only 31% of persons with disabilities are literate compared to 87% of persons without disabilities (UNESCWA, 2018).

A number of initiatives have been implemented across the region to reduce dropout and increase enrolment, but challenges persist. Some of these challenges are related to the system and the extent it supports equity and inclusion of all. Others are related to the teaching and learning environment and the extent it is ready for inclusion. More still arise from the circumstances of the child such as the socioeconomic and educational status of their parents and families. Therefore, a number of factors may contribute to children dropping out of education, such as poverty, child labour, educational background of the parents, future employment opportunities and the presence of violence, be it at school or in the family.

Similarly, factors related to the educational environment, such as unsuitable teaching methods, both the relevance and wide-nature of the adopted

curriculum, and lack of educational resources further contribute to the phenomenon. In the light of this, there is no one distinct event that causes dropout, rather the causes are interlinked, the result of a confluence of a set of events, contexts and settings (Hunt, 2008; Khochen-Bagshaw et al., 2018). Therefore, any efforts to tackle dropout must consider the intersection of these factors against the individual's circumstances and existing systems of support in order to support the enrolment of those out of education and reduce the phenomena of drop out.

Indeed, children with disabilities are among the most underrepresented groups in mainstream government schools and the most affected by dropout. Despite the growing governmental interest in the education of children with disabilities, and the increase in enrolment rate in the region, the enrolment of children with disabilities remains problematic. For example, in the Central and Southern regions of Iraq, only 1 in 19 children identified as having a disability attended government school, and 94% of enrolled children with disabilities had dropped out of school before the completion of primary education (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2018). The dropout rate of students with disabilities from mainstream classes appears to increase by educational stage, especially as they transition from segregated 'inclusive' classes to mainstream classes, as the former cease to operate, typically at end of lower secondary. After that, it seems that opportunities for learners with disabilities

to progress in education are limited. The persistence of high dropout and low enrolment in the region indicates that mandatory education is not fully or equitably applied, which inevitably contributes to widening long-term 'learning inequalities' between children. Evidences from the Arab region reveal that the dropping out of this segment of the population from school is caused and exacerbated by a number of factors. Some of these factors may push children and young people out of school education, others may pull them out of school education, and others may lead to them falling-out from school education. These three mechanisms of dropout are explained next.

4.2.1 Push-out factors

Broadly speaking, push-out factors are originated by and within the educational environment, leading to some learners to be 'pushed out' from education. For example, the unpreparedness of teachers to reach all learners in their teaching and learning practices, that do not take account of student differences, has been revealed as a major barrier facing educators to include diverse students in their classes, some of whom dropout. Government initiatives to build the capacities of the teaching force is ongoing in several countries of the region, but issues related to reaching all their educators persist, as witnessed in the UNESCO (2018) case studies.

Teachers often report the high number of students attending the same classroom, and the extensity of the curriculum they are required to complete, as the case studies from Sudan, Palestine and Egypt revealed. This creates compelling reasons for them not being able to include diverse learners in their classroom and hence reverse to the traditional ways of teaching that are failing to reach some of their learners. Similarly, a number of initiatives in the region have offered teachers training to include children with disabilities in their classes, but often the support teachers then need in order to apply them, such as teacher assistants, teaching resources suitable for their learners and guides for them to refer to in support of designing their lessons and meeting the needs of their diverse learners, are, to a large extent, absent. All of this make teachers ill-prepared to teaching diverse students in their classes and make the teaching and learning environment ripe for the drop out of those who cannot manage the demand of education.

The limited research carried out in the region indicates that very few government schools have resource rooms, and that when available they are often not equipped to meet the needs of the students attending the school in question. Since resource rooms are essential to providing some children with the necessary support they need to remain and advance in education, their absence can push some of these children to drop out. Other commonly reported push-out factors include those related to the attitudes of educators and learners and persisting stigma about disability in the region, leading to, for example, bullying or social isolation within the school community, and the continued practice of corporal punishment in many countries of the region.

4.2.2 Pull-out factors

Pull-out factors are very often related to issues outside school that would impact the education that takes place in the school or its value to the learner. The absence of suitable transportation methods, such as public or accessible transportation for those who may need adapted vehicles, may result in some children being out of education, as the case studies from Egypt and Palestine illustrate. Hence these factors may contribute to pulling children who may need them out of schooling education. Other pull-out factors include the socio-economic situation of the learner and their family, for example causing some children to leave education early to join the labour market or to look after sibling, parents or grandparents.

4.2.3 Fall-out factors

These factors are very often related to the system of education. For example, public pre-schooling education is not made available for all children in the vast majority of countries in the region. The limited availability of such services often means that only parents that can afford the expenses of private pre-schooling education can enrol their children in this stage of education. There is a growing body of literature that demonstrates attending at least one year of pre-schooling education has a significant positive impact on the retention of children in school for longer (UNESCO, 2020). Hence, many of those who are not afforded this opportunity may fall-out of education at early educational stages. This could be argued to disproportionately impact children with disabilities in the region, who are more likely to come from poorer rather than richer families (UNDESA, 2021), and whose education is often more undervalued by parents (Khochen-Bagshaw et al., 2018).

4.3 Equity and inclusion in practice

4.3.1 On a system level

UNESCO (2017) asserts that inclusion should be seen as a principle that is central to all education policies, as opposed to being a separate policy. In doing so, all different aspects of education and its governing legislation would be concerned with reaching all in an equitable and inclusive manner. This would require reviewing and developing existing policies, on government, district and school levels, from inclusion and equity perspectives. Such a review should inform the development of a national mission and vision of what an inclusive education system looks like at each of those levels. To this end, all individuals concerned must be aligned with these policies and practices, and in order to do so they must use the same terminology to discuss and describe issues related to inclusion in order for them to avoid assumptions and negative language towards some learners.

Informed by research evidences, policy should be developed with inclusion in mind to ensure practices are research driven, systematically applied, and have the necessary monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place. Developing inclusive education national frameworks can support the development of a holistic approach to inclusive education. The efforts and collaboration of state and nonstate actors must be formalized. Existing barriers (national, regional, local) and workable mitigating strategies suitable to local contexts must be identified. An action plan would then need to be drawn, setting priorities, with clear objectives, and outlining procedures for implementation, monitoring and reviewing. Such an action plan must identify who is responsible for what and what indicators would be used to assess achieved outcomes.

UNESCO (2017) recommends creating a high-level steering group headed by the ministry of education that has a clear political mandate to ensure its impact. The role of this group would be to lead development associated to equity and inclusion, organise the implementation of relevant policies and monitor their implementations. Members need to be on a decision-making level, such as general directors of relevant departments within the

Ministry of Education, such as departments of SEN, curriculum, exam and assessment, teacher training and development, and research and evidence. Steering groups should also include representation, at a senior level, from decision makers related to different ministries that may, in one way or the other, be involved in building a whole school approach to inclusion, such as the Ministry of Health, Transportation, Higher Education, Development and Social Affairs. To be effective, it is recommended that the steering group reports to the Minister of Education.

It is also recommended that this steering group has committees on district levels in order to report progress made to the steering group, as well as communicate any follow up directly with schools. Such committees need to have diverse representations including individuals with expertise in inclusion and concerned individuals themselves such as teacher, parent and student representatives. Similarly, committees on a school level should be created to offer schools advice and guidance on how to make schools more equitable for all are recommended. These committees would also need to be of diverse expertise and memberships including expertise in health and safety, inclusion and special needs education, human rights, and its members should represent teachers, parents, head teachers, students, local communities and higher education.

4.3.2 On a practical level

Inclusion in education requires educators to apply high quality methods within their teaching and learning process. This involves adopting a 'learner centred approach' that puts the student at the heart of all aspects of the teaching and learning process, from planning to teaching, assessment and reviewing. Differentiation is central to applying a learner centred approach and ultimately to building inclusive classrooms and indeed schools. Differentiation comes in a number of forms, and how teachers differentiate depends on a number of variables including the subjects they teach, the diversity of their students and the resources available to them.

4.3.3 Differentiation in teaching and learning

The practices with which a teacher teaches and learner learns can be differentiated in several ways. These include:

- **Differentiation by support:** teachers may offer more support for some children inside or outside the lesson, to enable them to meet the lesson objective.
- **Differentiation by questions:** teachers may ask different students different questions, for example asking those who are weak questions that require low thinking order questions, such what or who, and those working at a high-level, higher thinking order questions such as why or how.
- **Differentiation by task:** when preparing tasks, teachers can create one sheet containing gradually more difficult tasks that stimulate and stretch their thinking regardless of what level they are working at. In this case, teachers may aim to have all student solving 50% of the questions, the majority solving 70% and a few solving all.
- **Differentiation by assessment:** assessment can be conducted individually, in a group or as a class. For some learners, breaking down the learning objectives into small goals and assessing the extent that they have met each goal would lead to a more accurate way of assessing the attainment of the learner. Ultimately, this approach may help teachers to build on the specific needs of each learner.
- **Differentiation by pace:** not all learners can grasp the same idea in the same amount of time and by the same means of explanation. For achieving results, some learners may take a longer time and need more practice for the learning objective to be satisfied. Possible methods of supporting these learners include offering additional exercises, homework or reading material.
- **Differentiation by content:** the content of the lesson needs to be modified based on the individual needs of the learners. Examples include, providing illustrations of the visual elements for those who cannot access images or listing the ideas in bullet format for those who would benefit from clear and easy to read instructions.

- **Differentiation by intervention:** while in an inclusive school all learners are encouraged to learn in the same classroom, some learners may still require further intervention in support of their learning. This could be by receiving additional support outside the classroom environment, for developing skills that others may not need and which are not part of the curriculum, but supplementary to it, such as language therapy, mobility and orientation, or additional support in a learning objective.

Put simply, differentiation can be categorized into four broad categories:

- Content (what is being taught).
- Process (how it is taught).
- Product (how students demonstrate their learning).
- Learning environment (how the educational environment is adjusted to meet the needs of all students).

4.3.4 Formative and summative assessment

Formative assessment is central to knowing where children are on their learning journey, to know about their progress against their starting point and to know what support they may need to progress educationally. All of which may influence the outcomes of their summative assessment. For fair and equitable assessment, all students should be provided with the accommodations they need such as additional time, support before and/or after the lesson or some assistive tools to ensure equitable access to information, each based on their individual needs. Some students with disabilities and/or those described as having special educational needs may benefit from applying certain interventions to enable them to progress academically. Examples include, breaking learning objectives into small and achievable goals suitable to the individual needs of the student in question. Crucially, the interventions applied for any given child in lessons, during learning and formative assessment, should be kept as consistent as possible during any summative assessment they take so as to provide both consistent expectations and understanding of their learning.

4.3.5 Individual education plans

Some learners may benefit from an individual education plan that explains what needs to be taught, when it should be taught, by whom, what resources would be required, how the progress is to be assessed, and when the set plans would be reviewed. One of the common assumptions in the Arab region is that all persons with disabilities attending mainstream settings would require Individual education plans (IEP). However, not all children with disabilities require an IEP. For most, it is enough that teachers plan for their lessons with the inclusion of all in mind. In doing so, the accommodations that some children may need become an integral part of the general lesson plan. However, IEPs would remain of help for those who are not able to achieve the same educational goals required of their peers and may need to have distinct objectives suitable for their capacities and needs. IEPs for these students, could for example, build the skills they need to become independent learners in the future, but which are not necessarily required by other students.

4.3.6 Cooperative learning

There is strong research evidence suggesting that the use of co-operative group work has the potential for creating classroom conditions that can both maximise participation, whilst at the same time achieving high standards of learning for all students (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In particular, there is evidence to suggest that where teachers are skilful at planning and managing the use of cooperative group learning activities as part of their repertoire, this can lead to improved outcomes in terms of students' academic, social and psychological development. These approaches have also been found to be an effective means of supporting the participation of diverse students, including those who are new to a class, students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and those with disabilities. However, it is important to stress the need for skills in orchestrating this type of classroom practice, as poorly managed group approaches usually result lead to less efficient use of time.

Chapter 5

Progress on the road
of inclusion

5. Progress on the road of inclusion



▼ A cute kid with down's syndrome playing in kindergarten

Over the last decades, a number of initiatives have been implemented across the Arab region to increase enrolment, reduce dropout, support children with disabilities to receive quality inclusive education. Examples include: initiatives to support girls' education in rural areas of Egypt, Sudan and Morocco, building inclusive classes in government schools in Oman, Morocco and Jordan, building inclusive government schools in Lebanon, Iraq, UAE, creating regional disability committees in Egypt and establishing government steering groups concerned with disabilities in Jordan, Oman and Palestine. Furthermore, initiatives to develop curricula suitable for the needs of those not able to advance educationally in the general curriculum were also taken in Egypt. Many of these initiatives are joint

initiatives between government, non-governmental and international organisations interested in quality and equity education for all including those with disabilities. Supportive international organisations include UNICEF, FCDO, UNESCO, British Council, USAID and GIZ.

Annex 1 offers information about a number of interventions in a number of countries of the region. The case study of Egypt and elsewhere in the literature note that one of the outcomes of these initiatives has been greater visibility of persons with disabilities in mainstream education, along with the success that individuals with disabilities have achieved through education, which is on the rise in the region.

Making such success stories available and accessible has the potential to change attitudes of headteachers, policy makers and, indeed, parents and persons with disabilities about what can be achieved when education is made accessible and available for them, and encourage them to advocate for rather than hinder inclusive education. In addition, parents are increasingly advocating for the rights of their children to receive education in mainstream education which has driven some NGOs and governments to provide them with the support they and their children require in those settings. This could lead to broadening the scope of inclusion and its focus in the country where the intervention was implemented.

Despite the contributions that these and other initiatives have made to inclusion related policy and practice, rigorous research evaluating current initiatives and practices on inclusion in the region is scarce. The research that does exist focuses on the attitudes towards inclusion, however, the contribution of implemented initiatives on the change of attitudes is still limited. Indeed, research in the region is rarely used to inform policy reform or practice. Hence, there is a pressing need to further invest in research that produces evidence that is able to inform policy and practices, and that findings can inform the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of an initiative.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

6. Recommendations

6.1 The way forward

The importance of building inclusive educational systems, schools and classrooms that are equitable and inclusive for all including those with disabilities is growing. Inclusion scholars assert that to build inclusive educational system, both special and mainstream systems must not be separated (Ainscow, 2020). Rather they must complete and correspond to one another in terms of curricula, teacher training and supervision to name but a few. In so doing, existing educational systems need to be strengthened so they can serve all learners regardless of differences.

Strengthening educational systems requires building partnerships and collaboration between all those involved in the education of all learners in order to make best use of existing resources whether human, physical or materials. This requires developing a national education strategy in promotion of equity and inclusion on a country level that draws on existing resources to reform educational systems on government, community and school levels. The absence of the clarity and consistency such an approach brings may lead to some learners to continue to be excluded, or denied equitable education.

Similarly, building inclusive schools may require re-thinking the roles of everyone involved, including the roles and responsibilities of those at ministry, district and school levels, and communities. For example, national teacher preparedness programmes need to consider building teachers capacities in teaching inclusively, regional supervisors may need to supervise and advise in line with inclusion principles and head teachers need to enforce the policy of inclusion in their schools. Equally, an inclusive mainstream school may need to consider the structure of their school so that it is able to identify and assess the individual needs of their students, and meet the identified needs, as well as to make the resources that enable teachers to teach inclusively available. This may include having learning support assistants to support teachers to

teach inclusively, an inclusive coordinator to support teachers, parents and the school to better respond to the different needs of the students and 'inclusion champions' who would have expertise in different domains of disabilities and can offer technical support and guidance when required. All of this requires re-thinking existing structures to align it with the principles of inclusion in order to allow full access, participation and achievement for all learners regardless of differences.

Despite the growing awareness of the importance and need for equity and inclusion for all, including those with disabilities, more awareness campaigns are needed, especially in rural and suburban places, to increase awareness of parents, children with and without disabilities and local communities about the importance of education on their lives. Building awareness amongst educators, of what inclusion means, and how it can be reflected in the classroom, school and community is of equal importance. This is reflected in UNESCO's call for all involved in education to be aligned with the meaning of inclusion and to build a shared vision of how inclusion can be reproduced in practice in their contexts.

The involvement of all concerned parties, including children and their parents, in decision making is fundamental. This is often overlooked in existing literature on the Arab region. Strengthening collaboration among educators and schools, and indeed parents and schools as partners on the journey of their children's education helps change attitudes towards inclusion as well as make inclusive education more attainable. To be most effective, this collaboration needs to be imbedded in the school structure, with the aim of building positive collaboration between different ministries as well as between schools and parents, and schools and local communities.

Headteachers and other educators need to share experiences with one another in relation to what strategies they have applied and how well they worked. To do so, schools, districts and ministries need to provide suitable platforms for teachers to

share best practices and support them to share their experiences, what accommodations have been implemented, what worked with which children, and what results they have generated. Several collaboration strategies such as mutual observations, coaching and 'lesson study', can be applied in support of building professional collaborative approaches among teachers, and support and empower them to reach all their learners. Collaboration can also take place between schools, such as between high and low performing government schools, or between private and government schools, to support one another and work together to improve the quality of education offered. Similar to building collaboration between educators, collaboration between schools must be structured and systematically applied. Lesson study is one approach that schools can follow to build collaboration.

Whilst sharing successful stories and strategies is of great help in widening the knowledge of inclusion among educators, educators need to be careful about promoting charity approaches or approaches that do not support inclusion mistakenly labelled as 'success stories'. Therefore, a researched approach to identifying 'success stories' that draws on different aspects of the experiences of different parties needs to be followed. Consultations with experts in the field, as well as concerned groups themselves, may help validate such stories. This is true for research more generally. And although a number of interventions have been applied in the region, research that explores the effectiveness of these interventions on either the short- or long-term lives of participants is scarce.

As far as the physical environment is concerned, schools need to allow access for all learners to the school and its educational facilities. Schools may need to put access plans in place to improve access for all. Having a policy that makes it mandatory for all schools to apply the universal standards of inclusive design from the design stage of the building may lead to increasing accessibility and removing barriers associated to the physical environment. A prior step for that, however, must be ensuring that governments and ministries of education adopt standards for inclusive design and that measures are in place to monitor its implementation very early in the process.

UNESCO (2019) urges governments to take measures to put the education of learners with disabilities under the responsibilities of the ministry of education. It also urges the ministries of education to allocate adequate resources and to draw actionable plans to bring an end to the segregation of provisions and ensure a nation-wide commitment for the education of all.

Existing evidence from the Arab region shows that denying entry to mainstream education on the ground of disability is common across the region. To leave no one behind by 2030, countries of the Arab region must enforce policies, in line with their commitments to SDG4, that accept no allowance for denying entry to schooling education for any learners on the ground of differences, ability or disabilities. And that inclusion of all in mainstream education must be part of a whole school approach to inclusive education.

6.2 Approaches to promoting equity and inclusion for persons with disabilities in policy and practice across the region

Since late last century, a number of countries across the region have devised disability related laws that emphasise the rights of persons with disabilities in different aspects of society including education. A number of countries, including Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Oman, have also developed national strategies in promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, including in education. However, the definition of 'inclusive education' is still largely absent from national policies and documentations (UNESCO, 2020), and policies supporting inclusion practices on government, district and school levels remain scarce. This lack of direction makes it difficult to develop teaching and learning environments that are inclusive for all including those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019).

For example, teachers very often report that the number of students attending the same classrooms exacerbate their efforts to include persons with disabilities in their classes. For example, studies into inclusive education in Egypt reveal that despite the existing regulation suggesting having no more than 35 students in 'inclusive classrooms', some classes may have up to 60. Similarly, in Palestine the sizes



▼ Young woman with one arm isolated on pink background cheerful and confident showing ok gesture

of classrooms in some government schools are very small, making them very crowded. In Oman, the number of students attending the same classroom was not revealed to be problematic. However, despite the lower number of students attending the same classroom in Oman, the inclusion of children with disabilities still faces a number of barriers, not least due to the way that this concept has been interpreted and applied. Indeed, some scholars (e.g. Hattie and Clarke, 2018) assert that changing teaching methods rather than reducing the number of students attending the same class would help reach all learners in those classrooms. This should not be interpreted as meaning that changing teaching methods on their own is all what is required to include all children attending the same classroom, as the support needs of children with disabilities would still need to be assessed and identified, and teachers themselves would need to be supported in order to reach all learners. This can take a number of forms, such as having a learning support assistance, a co-teacher or the necessary assistive resources, be it technological or tangible, to be used in their classes.

Moreover, very often in the Arab region, the language used in policy and strategies to discuss issues related to the education of children with disabilities reflects the charity and medical approaches to disability. Whilst the former considers the education of learners with disabilities as a charitable exercise that those without disabilities are compelled to offer out of the kindness of their heart, the latter puts the burden of the difficulties in the individual and requires them to 'rehabilitate' themselves so to fit into existing structures. Both the charity and medical approaches to disability, therefore, relegate the person with the disability to something less valued than the person without a disability, and represent significant barriers to inclusion and equitable education for all. By focusing on the individual and their disabilities, they further shift the focus away from the external barriers to inclusion that need to be removed and instead situate the barriers in the individuals whom they seek to rehabilitate and to make 'normal' or 'able' to access what other 'normal' people can.

It is very common for educators in the region to address persons with disabilities using language that situates the burden of the disability and/or difficulty within the individual. For example, terms such as 'slow learners', 'the disabled' and 'the blind' are frequently used. Furthermore, when referring to persons with disabilities versus those without a disability, the term 'normal' is often used to refer to the latter, whilst various terms, including 'special needs', are used to indicate the former. Indeed, very often educationalists in the Arab region tend to refer to these two groups as if they are completely separate and discrete from one another, one being 'able' and the other 'special'. Using the term 'special needs' risks putting the deficit of the difficulties on the individuals and hence diminish the responsibility of educators to identify and remove barriers that may disable some children from receiving equitable access to education. For example, it may encourage the belief that the 'special' children form a separate group of learners who need to be diagnosed and referred to suitable a provision (e.g. an alternative classroom), served by specialised individuals alongside other 'special needs' students. Although sometimes described as a form of inclusive education, this approach clearly reflects the practice of segregation, and ultimately impedes efforts towards the promotion of equity and inclusion for all.

Arguably, not all persons with disabilities need extra support or have SEN, and not all learners who need extra support have a disability. Rather, SEN is a broad term also covering behavioural, emotional, social and cognitive difficulties, some of which is not regarded as a disability under existing definitions of disability. From an inclusive perspective, to avoid this confusion and situating the difficulties in the individual, but rather in the support needs themselves, some scholars use the term 'learners who are described as having SEN', or 'learners who are identified as requiring special support provision'. However, they mostly advocate avoiding the term SEN, and instead using language that encourages identifying and removing barriers facing some learners to access, participate and achieve in education, to raise awareness of required support and intervention methods that enable all children to develop educationally. By adopting the latter approach, a whole new means of building inclusive environment needs to be considered.

The language used to address persons with disabilities is a complex issue, since what terms are used and how they are understood have and continue to evolve over time. For example, informed by the United Nations CRPD, some advocate for the use of the 'person-first approach', that maintains the primacy of the individual over any kind of difficulty they may have. Whilst others advocate for the use of a language that situates a person's difficulties in external factors rather than within the individual. The latter position argues for the use of the term 'disabled people' instead of 'people with disabilities', to avoid situating the disability in the individual and instead to indicate that disabilities come about and are indeed situated in relation to contextual barriers that limit the presence, participation and achievement of individual learner. The latter is expressed well in the 'social model of disability', advocated for by disabled people in the UK over the last quarter of the twentieth century, which has since started to gain traction globally, including in the Arab region.

Applying the social model of disability allows us to explore the external barriers facing persons with disabilities which may directly impact their inclusion or otherwise exclusion from education. This in turn should influence the way we address the barriers facing persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and indeed, the way we address persons with disabilities in policy and documentation, as the language we use impacts and reveals our understanding of where the barriers are situated. Central to any progress, nonetheless, is the data and information available in support of measuring progress and the extent available data reflects the reality of the population it represents.

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Annexes

Annexes

Annex 1. Summary of a number of initiatives associated to equity and inclusion

The Girl's Education Initiative of Egypt



▼ A group of children in a reading education class in Egypt

The Girl's Education Initiative of Egypt was a joint initiative implemented in partnership with international and national local and regional organizations as well as the government and a number of voluntary organizations. It received funding from different sources, governmental, national and international. The focus of this initiative was to reach out of education girls and to increase their enrolment. The initiative targeted girls residing in rural places mainly those who are between the ages of six to thirteen years old.

This initiative created over a 1000 girl friendly schools, trained facilitators, supervisors and teachers on interactive teaching methods, and most importantly supported around 25,000 girls to enrol in education. It further offered the government with statistical data about the rate of enrolled children and the gap between both genders. Such data was not available before and offered the government the information they need to more effectively monitor progress than before.

This initiative also addressed supplementary and essential elements to the enrolment of girls such as food and educational tools. Such an intervention had the potential to have a positive impact on raising awareness of girl's education, building the capacities of educators, strengthening partnerships between different involved international, governmental, national non-governmental and local organisations, introduce interactive methods of teaching and learning and develop the capacities in methods of planning and implementation of involved NGOs. This initiative has taken a holistic approach to developing the education of girls, an approach that has been recognised to contribute to development for the long run.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.unicef.org/egypt/education>

<https://education-profiles.org/northern-africa-and-western-asia/egypt/~inclusion>

Facilitating Conditional 'Cash transfer' Programme in Morocco



Ana Flasker/Shutterstock.com

▼ A schoolgirl standing in front of the class and pointing to Arabic letters alphabet in a local school in Morocco

In their efforts to illuminate the phenomenon of dropout, the government in Morocco applied a number of initiatives such as improving the school environment, increasing the number of schools available, and also addressing the socio-economic situation of some parents. In their endeavours to improve access and reduce inequality, the government emergency response to the issue of out of school had provided conditional cash transfer to reach those from poor socio - economic background. The aim was to support parents who were not able to cover the school expenses of their children by providing them with the support they need to do so. To this end, it provided them financial support to support them to enrol their children in education and to follow up on their progress.

This project passed through a piloting stage for a year, during which the impact of the programme on the retention of children and their academic attainment and the improvement in the economic situation of the parents was measured. This phase the project targeted around 88,000 boys and girls from poor background residing in five different provinces of Morocco.

The impact of the programme was reflected in a 25% increase in new enrolled children in grade 1, 10% increase in the enrolment in basic education and decrease in the absence from secondary education. The success that this programme achieved led to widening its approach to reach more provinces and more beneficiaries which has increased to reach the 400,000 students.

More information can be found at:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/671091468189256077/pdf/97318-2010Sep17-Morocco-Conditional-Cash-Transfers-Box-391462B-PUBLIC.pdf>

Capacity Building Programmes in Iraq



▶ A group of Kurdish students and young people visiting a park where the sculptures of artists and statesmen are located

As part of a financing agreement between the European Union and the Iraqi government, the former has been supporting the education sector in Iraq since 2006 through a series of funded Capacity building programmes. These programmes targeted the development of basic and higher education including the TVET sector, and were implemented in partnerships with international organisations such as the British Council, UNESCO and UNICEF as well as governmental organisations in Iraq such as the ministries of education, planning, social and labour affairs, together with a range of different civil society actors. The focus of these programmes ranged from system building and capacity strengthening of Ministry of Education, improving the quality and equality of the education system, strengthening the institutional capacities in education administration at central and local level and promoting decentralization in education management, to Increasing access to inclusive quality primary and secondary education for persons with disabilities, IDPs and refugees in crisis affected areas in Iraq. For example, in their endeavours to support the government of Iraq to improve access to quality education for children with disabilities, the British Council, supported the Ministries of Education of each of Baghdad and Erbil in the development of a 'National Policy Framework for Promoting Equity and Inclusion in Education for Learners with Special Educational Needs and/ or Disabilities'. This Framework, and its accompanying 10-year Road Map, was developed by a working group representing various government departments, NGOs concerned with disabilities, national and international consultants. The framework and its eleven thematic areas have been endorsed by the relevant ministers.

These thematic areas represent: the legislative environment, the promotion of a culture of inclusive education, impairment identification and referral to mainstream schools or special institutes, accessibility of school buildings, accessing quality education, inclusive curricula, equitable access to examinations and assessments, educational supervision, training and educational development, effective partnership among all parties concerned with the education of persons with disabilities, research and studies.

The British Council also contributed to building the capacities of teachers in mainstream schools on inclusive education, whereby six 'training of trainer' workshops were held with a total of 180 participants. Participants then cascaded the training to 6000 teachers in mainstream schools across Iraq. An additional workshop on inclusive education was held with lecturers from ten universities to build their capacities in inclusive education. The project also targeted building the capacities of headteachers as well as teachers teaching children and young people with hearing impairments, those with a vision impairment and those with Down Syndrome.

More information can be found at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/72136/system-building-and-capacity-strengthening-ministry-education-moe-and-its-sub-national_kk

<https://iraq.britishcouncil.org/en/programmes/education/capacity-building-primary-secondary-education>

Education Voucher Program in Saudi Arabia



Ahmed Hamdy Hassan/Shutterstock.com

▼ A classroom with a group of Saudi Arabian students raising their hands with their teacher in a class

The 'Educational Voucher Program' in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a model for programs that aim to provide support to students with disabilities to help them learn. This program, which was launched in 2016, comes within the initiatives of the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education in the Kingdom, and based on the initiatives of the National Transformation Program 2020, to encourage the participation of the private sector in investing in public education in the Kingdom, developing nurseries and kindergarten programs and expanding their services to include all regions of the Kingdom. This project serves the categories of people with intellectual disability, autism, multiple disabilities, deaf people, people with vision impairment, in the age group 6-12 years, and children requiring social security ages 5-6 years.

These educational vouchers are a free grant given to private educational institutions licensed by the Ministry of Education and relevant authorities, to provide study seats for targeted male and female students, according to specific requirements and standards. The program aims to provide high-quality educational services for students of special education and kindergartens through educational vouchers, and to achieve the state's direction in raising the enrolment rates of children in pre-primary education, and to create equal opportunities for equal and appropriate education in schools for students with special education at kindergartens, and to encourage the participation of the private education sector in developing public and special education.

<https://voucher.tatweer.sa/specialeduc>

<https://voucher.tatweer.sa/kindergarten>

Communicating and sharing information in the United Kingdom



Schools and colleges in the United Kingdom use several methods to cascade information about the support offered to children with disabilities. These methods include: regular emails setting out how a pupil or student is to be supported, formal meetings to discuss and agree support, class list or registers that summarise children's needs and where further information on support strategies and intervention can be found, school/college information management system, and pupil or student profiles which the learners hold and take to each lesson. These are often used in conjunction with each other. For example, in Honywood Secondary school in Essex, England, the SEN team send an email to all staff who teach a particular learner. That email contains a list of the strategies that staff should use to support the individual and a link to the staff intranet directory that holds their learner passport, further details of interventions carried out and information on the types of needs they address. Whilst many of these methods primarily allow professionals to keep abreast of a child's changing needs and progress, the data collection that accompanies them also facilitates effective communication and collaboration with parents and carers.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/636465/DfE_SEN_Support_Case_studies.pdf

UK government guidance on the products used by schools in the UK to store and share this information can be found at the following link.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496385/Factsheet_-_ICT_MIS_System_Considerations_1_.pdf

A national policy to support all learners in Finland



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In Finland, 'special education is actually nothing special', rather, the Ministry of Education and Culture points out that 'early intervention and sustained individual support for every student are keys to educating the whole child' and that education should be equitable and of a high quality for all. The Pupil and Student Welfare Act (2014) emphasises the participation of all learners, collaborative learning, welfare, health and social responsibility, and interaction and inclusion. It promotes equal access to quality student learning, an accessible learning environment, early support for those who need it and improved co-operation between home and school. This included advocating for every child to attend their nearest mainstream school.



More can be read about Finland's approach to include all learners through its education policy at the following links.

<https://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/country-profile-Finland-2020.pdf>

<https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/finland/legislation-and-policy>

Summary of six case studies

Initiative	Active country	Implementing partners and funders	Key features
The Girl's Education Initiative 	Egypt	Ministry of Education, UNICEF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Created over a 1000 girl friendly schools, trained facilitators, supervisors and teachers on interactive teaching methods. ➤ Supported around 25,000 girls to enrol in education. ➤ Offered the government statistical data about rate of enrolled children and the gap between genders. ➤ Addressed supplementary and essential elements to the enrolment of girls such as food and educational tools.
Facilitating Conditional 'Cash transfer' Programme 	Morocco	Moroccan Ministry of National Education, Conseil Supérieur de l'Enseignement, Abdul Lateef Jameel Poverty Action Lab of MIT, World Bank (Spanish Impact Evaluation Trust Fund, Gender Action Plan, Korean Trust Fund, Governance Partnership Facility, Japanese Social Development Fund)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Government offered conditional cash transfer to reach those from poor socio-economic background to reduce dropout. ➤ Targeted around 88,000 boys and girls from poor background residing in five provinces of Morocco. ➤ 25% increase in new enrolled children in grade 1, 10% increase in the enrolment in basic education. - Decrease in the absence from secondary education. ➤ Widened to reach more provinces and beneficiaries increasing reach to 400,000 students.
Capacity Building in Primary and Secondary Education 	Iraq	Ministries of Education (Baghdad and Erbil), Ministries of Social and Labour Affairs (Baghdad and Erbil), British Council, UNESCO, UNICEF, European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ System building and capacity strengthening of Ministry of Education strengthening the institutional capacities in administration at central and local levels. ➤ Promoted decentralization in education management. ➤ Increased access to inclusive quality primary and secondary education for persons with disabilities, IDPs and refugees in crisis affected areas of Iraq. ➤ Developed 'National Policy Framework for Promoting Equity and Inclusion in Education for Learners with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities' ➤ Six 'training of trainer' workshops delivered to 180 participants. ➤ Participants cascaded training to 6000 teachers in mainstream schools across Iraq.

<p>Education Voucher Program</p> 	Saudi Arabia	Ministry of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Based on the initiatives of the National Transformation Program 2020. ➤ Serves people with intellectual disability, autism, multiple disabilities, deaf people, people with vision impairment, in the age group 6-12 years, and children requiring social security ages 5-6 years. ➤ Educational vouchers were a free grant given to private educational institutions licensed by the Ministry of Education and relevant authorities to provide study seats for targeted male and female students.
<p>Communicating and Sharing Information</p> 	United Kingdom	Department for Education, Local Authority SEN teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Cascades information about the support offered to children with disabilities between interested parties.
<p>'Special education is actually nothing special'</p> 	Finland	Ministry of Education and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 'Early intervention and sustained individual support for every student are keys to educating the whole child'. ➤ Emphasises participation of all learners, collaborative learning, welfare, health and social responsibility, and interaction and inclusion. ➤ Advocates for every child to attend their nearest mainstream school.

Annex 2.

List of a literature review and five case studies

سعيد إسماعيل عمر. منظمة الأمم المتحدة للتربية والعلم والثقافة (اليونسكو). (2018). مراجعة الأدبيات حول التعليم الجامع في المنطقة العربية ودول الخليج.

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