

Primary Schooling for Children with Disabilities: A Review of African Scholarship

Executive Summary

The African Education Research Database (AERD) was searched for articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2010 and 2018 to explore how the education of children with disabilities is understood and investigated within African education research. The systematic review of research from 14 Sub-Saharan African countries examined the patterns (if any) in publications on disability and education by researchers based in Sub-Saharan Africa (geographical and thematic focus), the salient findings emerging from this body of research, and the implications of the study for current policy, practice, future research, and investment on disability and education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Analysis of the publications highlighted the emphasis on primary education in disability research within the Sub-Saharan Africa region. Almost half of the disability studies in AERD focus on primary education (39 studies), with less emphasis given to secondary (23 studies), higher (19 studies), and early childhood education (7 studies). This report focuses on the 39 studies undertaken at the level of primary education. Although the AERD includes research from 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the geographical coverage of the 39 studies included in this review is limited to only 14 Sub-Saharan African countries.

The review indicated that within Sub-Saharan Africa, research in disability and education focuses on just a few countries, with most studies taking place in Kenya. A majority of the research papers are from Kenya (9 studies), followed by Botswana (6), Uganda (5), Tanzania (4), Nigeria (3),

Ghana (3), and Lesotho (2). Out of the 39 studies, 14 were written by authors based in Sub-Saharan Africa. In comparison, the remaining 25 studies were authored through collaborations with non-academic organizations or with researchers based outside of the region. In half of the countries, no research was carried out by Sub-Saharan-Africa-based academics. A total of 64 percent of the research studies were conducted via research affiliations with United Kingdom (43 percent), Australia, the United States, and Canada.

The 39 studies reviewed were grouped under three main themes:

1. **Testing efficacy of specific interventions (6 studies)**—Studies in this theme focused on interventions to support the learning of children with disabilities in primary mainstream and special schools. Four out of six studies were conducted in special schools, five focused mostly on hearing impairment, and five were concerned with measuring reading, language, and literacy using quantitative methods. The review highlights the complicating effects of bilingual literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa, which need to be addressed to support a richer experience of inclusion for children with disabilities. The absence of student voices and perspectives in these interventions was notable.
2. **Implementation of inclusive education (28 studies)**—This theme had the largest number of studies and focused on understanding how inclusive education can become a reality in Sub-Saharan Africa contexts. Most studies (15) focused on teacher training for implementing inclusive education, followed by understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of different stakeholders (12 studies) such as parents, family/community,

teachers, and children with disabilities. Only one study examined the learning outcomes of children with disabilities as compared to their nondisabled peers.

Analysis of the studies highlight the clear need for contextualizing inclusive education in local, national, and regional realities. Many of the studies noted that cultural context, local belief systems, and historical developments have informed attitudes and beliefs about disability and/or inclusive education among stakeholders. Some studies underscore the role of colonialism in shaping educational practices and policies and explicitly promote a decolonizing and post-colonial approach to inclusive education, highlighting the importance of engaging within the African context—local belief systems, cultural concepts, and national education systems.

Eight studies in this category employed quantitative methods. Three studies mostly performed a secondary analysis on existing large-scale datasets. The remainder of the studies (including one mixed-methods study) focused on measuring attitudes (parents' and teachers'), knowledge, practices, and the training of teachers in inclusion concepts. The research concluded that increased knowledge and formal training about disability and/or inclusive education improved parents' or teachers' knowledge, skills, and willingness to include children with disabilities.

Nineteen studies used qualitative methods, focusing on attitudes and interactions between multiple participants (children, parents, teachers, and communities) in implementing inclusive education. The review noted the disproportionate skew toward teachers as primary participants in these studies.

3. **Policy Reviews**—The four studies under this theme traced the development of international thinking on inclusive education and regional and in-country developments. These reviews showed that inclusive education is far from a reality because enrollment and progression for children with disabilities continue to be low despite the government’s adoption of inclusive education policies.

Studies reviewed under this theme noted that practical, contextualized knowledge and the local context should inform inclusive education policies for schools, teachers, and decision-makers. Economic and social policies should respond to the realities in which inclusive education policies are implemented, thereby adopting a “holistic approach” to inclusive education. Research shows the need for greater regional knowledge sharing of national inclusive education policies and approaches, an increased exchange of knowledge from communities and research evidence to policymakers, and improved monitoring and evaluation of policies to keep implementation on track.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop a contextualized understanding of inclusive education.** A recurrent issue in these research studies is the confusion and lack of clarity around inclusive education, which is further complicated by disconnected policy ambitions and the practical realities of implementation. Research studies highlight the rejection of medical and social models of disability, noting the challenges of applying the terminology and concepts of disability developed in Northern contexts to Sub-Saharan African circumstances. African scholars acknowledge that efforts toward inclusive education are complex and are best developed while considering local socio-cultural and practical realities.

2. **Adopt systems-level change.** The review notes that barriers to inclusive education are a product of the incoherence of systems that have introduced education policies without adequate resources for implementing action plans. Shifting this would need careful consideration at all levels, extending from acknowledging the uniqueness of cultures that influence the local education systems to the realities of classroom provision. Changes at all levels must be part of an overall program and policy framework, supported by ongoing dialogue between policymakers, government, local practitioners, parents, and persons with disabilities.

3. **Include the voices of children with disabilities.** Voices of teachers and parents dominate most research studies included in this systematic review, discounting the voices of children with disabilities.

Of the five studies that included the voices of learners with disabilities, students identified a range of positive experiences and friendships at school. Although learners with disabilities were very much aware of the stigma, discrimination, lack of resources, accommodations, and bullying at school, this did not alter their desire to attend school. Furthermore, the studies identified children with disabilities as strong self-advocates with the ability to voice their needs and concerns. This is starkly different from the barriers and enablers identified by teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to promote inclusive education at school and within communities.

4. **Identify and adopt local strategies.** The review identifies the possibility of developing and implementing local strategies for promoting inclusive education, including forming

school inclusion communities, pooling community resources when government funds are limited, leveraging social capital, and fundraising, where possible. Various researchers argue for designing holistic, inclusive education projects that go beyond enrollment and sensitization activities. There is a need to carefully rethink models of teacher training so that they exceed the one-off workshop approach. Training on inclusive education should draw on local and contextual realities and be an intrinsic part of ongoing professional development.

This report is not without its limitations and findings are presented as a snapshot of scholarship on disability and primary education in Sub-Saharan African contexts that continue to make progress in understanding and addressing the complexities and constraints on inclusive education. Notably, the AERD excludes South Africa, which has been central in knowledge production in this region. Nonetheless, this review highlights important areas of consensus, what needs to be valued, and the existing gaps in knowledge, which need to be addressed going forward.