



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Transforming Education for Children with Disabilities

Research Exchange Workshop Series:

Researching Disability-Inclusive Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

Date: Thursday, September 30th, 2021 | Time: 7:00 - 9:30 am EST

On the 30th of September, 2021, the [Inclusive Education Initiative](#) (IEI) conducted its fourth and final workshop as a part of the [Research Exchange Workshop Series](#). This workshop brought together early career and established researchers from universities across Eastern, Southern, Western and Central Africa as well as South Asia. These researchers had all attended one out of the three previous regionally focused workshops, and were now brought together for a culminating event.

The workshop series aimed to amplify Southern researchers' voices and provide a platform for early career and established researchers to share their perspectives on the disability-inclusive education research priorities. It offered them the space to explore what they needed to advance their research agendas, both in the global context of the Sustainable Development Goal for Quality Education and their national contexts. The purpose of the final workshop was to for all participants to gather and discuss sustaining these engagements and dialogues while forging strong connections across regions and learning from each other's work.



The objectives of the scholarship exchange were outlined as:

The workshop was attended via Zoom by 59 researchers from 20 countries across the region who represented 41 universities. The participants had, on average, 10-15 years of experience.

The content and discussion questions for this workshop were guided by conversations and analysis of the discussions in the previous workshops, as well as the aim to understand how to sustain the engagement and connections made through the Research Exchange.

The finale workshop began with presenting results from thematic analysis of previous workshop and presentations from one representative from each of the previous workshops sharing their key takeaways and personal learnings, allowing for an in-depth reflection into the first three workshops.

In order to facilitate discussions among the participants and to allow them to share their perspectives, they were divided into breakout groups, ensuring representation from different countries and universities, along with a facilitator and cofacilitator to help guide the conversations. The breakout groups sought to tackle two key questions, and their responses are summarized below.

What are the different ways that the community of practice (CoP) for researchers can be more participatory?



- **Collaborative Research:** Researchers pointed out that one crucial purpose of the CoP can be to form connections and collaborate on different research projects. This helps in understanding cross-cultural practices associated with Inclusive education, as well as providing new avenues for exposure and building networks.
- **Virtual meetings:** There was active interest in setting up more virtual meetings, either in smaller interest groups or as a large group like the IEI Research Exchange workshop setting.
- **Participation from stakeholders:** Several scholars mentioned involving stakeholders in the CoP from time-to-time, allowing for their voices to influence research priorities and providing additional context to work being. This would increase the researchers' engagement in the community as it brings in resources, they don't easily have access to.
- **Online Activities:** The virtual platforms can help reach out to the different research practitioners working in other parts of the world, along with the network, the help of online engagement in knowledge sharing.



- **Leveraging each other's strengths:** Scholars suggested using each other as peer reviewers and even finding potential mentors through the group, particularly for early career researchers. The space can be used to share challenges and needs, which can be fulfilled by other members of the CoP.

What kind of activities do you think the CoP for Researchers can undertake moving forward?

- **Publication:** A joint publication can provide common objectives for the CoP to achieve, which will also help the community flourish. Researchers can publish their work and also get access to other research projects from around the globe.
- **Agenda Setting:** One suggestion was that the members within the CoP should set a common research agenda agreeing on the thematic areas and the methods used to do research together. The CoP also should decide on the challenges that the members can collaborate to solve.



- **Newsletter:** Scholars expressed interest in a monthly newsletter or mailer that compiles research and funding opportunities, new articles, job openings etc. This way even those who don't check the forum regularly have access to the information in one place.
- **Blog Platform:** Researchers suggested an active blog where they could publish their own work and read blogs from other researchers as well. The IEI's [Words For Inclusion](#) platform currently caters to this need by sourcing blogs from the researchers in this workshop series.
- **Exchange programs:** The CoP can facilitate an exchange for researchers across universities to work together and build more in-person connections, particularly across different geographies.



Researchers were also asked what held them back from actively engaging on the forum currently, and the two common responses were:

1. **Members not having enough time:** There are already several competing priorities within the university that take up the scholars' time, which does not leave enough time for them to check the forum and engage.
2. **Members not using LinkedIn frequently:** Several scholars mentioned that they do not use LinkedIn frequently or at all, resulting in them not checking the Community of Practice page.

In order to build comfort around the platform, a 5-minute demonstration on the uses, benefits and possibilities within the LinkedIn forum was conducted. This gave the researchers the opportunity to see, in real time, how to use the various features within the CoP and how to actively engage with and contribute to the content.

One of the core purposes of this research exchange series was to provide the scholars with exposure to industry experts and help forge connections. As part of this effort, a fireside chat was conducted to help understand what drives research priorities in disability and inclusive education, specifically from the perspective of donors and research organizations. The fireside chat was moderated by Leslie Schwartz, professor at Stellenbosch University. The speakers included Aysha Harwood, Human Capital Policy Adviser at FCDO, Hanna Alasuutari, Senior Education Specialist at the World Bank, Hannah Lorryman, Head of Policy at Sight Savers and Lena Somme, Advisor at NORAD. Speakers shared their thoughts on the following questions, after which researchers had the opportunity to ask questions of the speakers.

- What have been the research priorities/topics of interest within disability and inclusive education with your respective organizations?
- What are the drivers/factors influencing these topics to be selected as research priorities?
- In your professional experience, what kind of evidence has been most useful from a policy influencing perspective?
- What can be some ways of partnering with local researchers to ensure that local knowledge and voices are being considered?

Speakers shared that there is an emphasis on gathering evidence on the twin-track approach, and encouraged researchers to look into how focused as well as mainstream activities that are targeted at persons with disabilities can be designed for success. There was an emphasis given to exploring how technology, including access to it, in the time on Covid-19, has impacted the ability of learners with disabilities to access education opportunities. Researchers should look into how what additional support students can be given as we use EdTech devices and remote approaches.

Quantitative and mixed-methods approaches were noted to be the more useful forms of data that funders look for, especially those in strictly evidence-based organizations. Researchers were also encouraged to approach policy makers from the start instead of after the work is done; to have a dialogue about why the research is important, what value it adds and what gap it fills, allowing for there to be buy-in from the start. This provides an avenue for exposure for local scholars and gives them an opportunity to have their voices heard throughout the process.

Teacher continuous development and effective teaching were both topics that the speakers' work focused on, and they encouraged researchers to help develop evidence bases on the same. Ground-level data can help design effective approaches and were noted to be areas that funders often prioritize.

Speakers were then given the chance to provide researchers with a last piece of advice, allowing them to summarize their thoughts as well. Flexibility while working was a key point, particularly since priorities coming from the global South versus donors aren't always completely aligned and can sometimes derail the research process. Researchers were additionally encouraged to keep engaging at the global, country and local level with stakeholders, funders, organizations and any entity in between. The constant communication gives the scholars the chance to constantly learn and broaden their own understandings of their communities.



This final workshop provided a strong foundation for future collaborations among researchers, as well as provided space for the scholars to truly explore the possibilities when it comes to their own work as well as the field of disability inclusive research. Scholars were directed towards the IEI sub-Community of Practice, a space designed for those who attended the workshop series, to encourage them to say connected and take ownership over creating meaningful networks. Blog posts from workshop participants have also been shared on the [IEI Website's Words for Inclusion](#) platform allowing for participants to read each other's work and continue to engage with each other. The IEI is also building a repository of research by researchers from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. We hope the space will continue to help connect rich, local research and researchers to a global audience.