



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Transforming Education for Children with Disabilities

Research Exchange Workshop Series:

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

Summary Report

Background

The international focus on disability-inclusive education is growing. The sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG 4) on education addresses both rights to education by promoting access to schools; and rights *in* education by endorsing quality education for all, including children with disabilities. Research data that can inform policy, planning, and implementation is critical to ensure inclusive quality education. Sustainable Development Goal-17.9 further promotes international support for effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries through North-South and South-South collaboration.

However, evidence suggests that the current status of research in the field of disability-inclusive education is, at best, patchy with insufficient evidence on school access, participation, learning outcomes, and effectiveness of implementation programs (Srivastava et al. 2013, Howgego et al. 2014).

While the lack of robust evidence is a significant concern, in parallel, there is an increasing acknowledgment that researchers based in sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries have limited pathways and opportunities to undertake and publish research. This significantly impedes their ability to contribute meaningfully to the disability-inclusive education agenda, resulting in a significant over-reliance on Northern dominated discourses in international and national policy formulation, thereby inhibiting contextual understanding and action.

The World Bank's [Inclusive Education Initiative](#), in partnership with [CaNDER](#) at the University of Cambridge, [University of Gondar](#), and [Kathmandu University](#), is working to encourage novel ideas, research, and evidence to tackle the issues mentioned above. As part of this endeavor, a research exchange workshop series was conducted to bring together researchers and academics from the Global South to identify research priorities in disability-inclusive education and to create a space to understand better the challenges that sub-Saharan Africa and South Asian scholars are facing as they conduct research and publish their work on disability-inclusive education. The workshop series proved to be a one-of-a-kind opportunity for the scholars to engage and form strong partnerships.

Objectives

The following were the objectives of the IEI Research Exchange Workshop Series:



Overview

The research exchange series was held between June and September 2021 across four separate workshops. The first workshop brought together research scholars from East and Southern Africa (June 29th, 2021), the second workshop brought together scholars from West and Central Africa (July 29th), and the third brought together scholars from South Asia (September 8th). This series culminated in a fourth and final workshop on September 30th that brought together all the participants. The workshops were attended by 59 researchers and World Bank staff, donor partners, and academics from partner universities. 63% of scholars had previously collaborated on internationally funded research and 33% identified as a person with a disability.

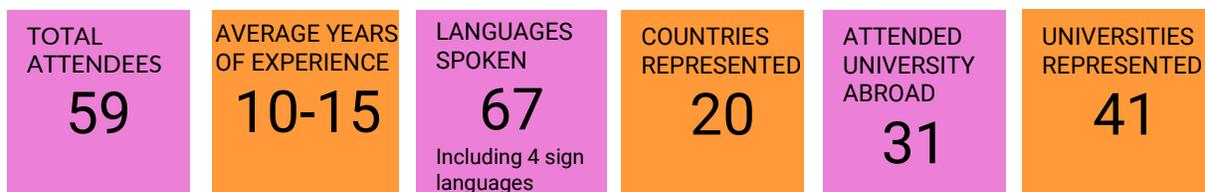


Figure 1: A breakdown of the demographic data for participants of all four workshops

Researcher Outreach: The key feature of the research exchange workshop series was to engage with researchers based in universities in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia researching disability inclusion and education.

Outreach for potentially interested researchers and scholars was conducted via the [IEI Community of Practice](#), [IEI Newsletter](#), World Bank Country office referrals, dissemination through networks, and social media. Interested participants were invited to express interest via a Participant Interest Form, which asked for demographic information, research interests, and published work, among other questions. Researchers whose academic background was

most relevant were invited to attend the series. There was an emphasis on ensuring that participants/researchers were based and working in universities in the region to allow for rich, more contextual conversations while also providing a space for underrepresented voices.

Pre-workshop Forums: Selected participants were invited to join pre-workshop forums on LinkedIn, allowing them to engage with their fellow scholars ahead of time, network, and form connections. Participants in the forums were engaged via content and reading materials on disability inclusion in research and were invited to engage by posting thoughts, comments, and reflections.

Workshop Content: The content of the research exchange was informed by the latest research and emerging evidence on African and South Asian Scholarship on inclusive education and was guided by two important pieces of new research. The findings from the two studies underscore the importance of partnerships, engagement, and exchange amongst the scholarship:

[Primary Schooling for Children with Disabilities- A Review of African Scholarship](#)- Using the African Education Research Database (AERD), 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.

[Research Capacity, Training, and Culture in South Asian Universities](#)- The exploratory mixed-methods case study, commissioned by the IEI to inform the Research Exchange, highlights the research issues as related to South Asia, particularly to build an understanding of how to better build capacity and support for disability-inclusion research in South Asian universities. Countries of focus included Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The study was conducted through three modes of data collection: an open online questionnaire with over 200 participants, focus group discussions in five countries, and analysis of program and module documents from South Asian universities.

Primary Schooling for Children with Disabilities- A Review of African Scholarship- Key Messages

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).

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, research in disability and education focuses on just a few countries, with most studies taking place in Kenya.

Out of the 39 primary education studies, 14 were written by authors based in sub-Saharan Africa, and 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 findings from both of these studies highlighted even further the challenges faced by researchers in the Global South, from lack of access to publishing opportunities to struggles with administrative loads and myriad other hurdles. These were further reiterated in the discussions during the workshops.

The primary purpose of the workshop series, through discussion and dialogue, was to create an opportunity to identify solutions and low-hanging fruits for increasing visibility and collaboration.

Research Capacity, Training and Culture in South Asian Universities: Key Messages

Most higher education institutions in the region lack sufficient public financial support, adequate infrastructure, access to regional and international research networks, and support and time allocation for academic faculty to conduct research

Many highly skilled researchers and scholars migrate to Global North countries and, although the economic impact of 'human capital flight' may be mixed, this does impact research culture and capacity.

South Asian universities don't attract as many internationally mobile scholars, due to lack of resources and a dearth of highly skilled researchers

Most research that is published in Global North journals feature either Global North researchers or South Asian heritage researchers with a **significant link to the Global North** through residency, collaboration, or research training from Northern universities.

The challenges that students face in conducting research are predominantly **not enough resources (86%), not enough time in their programs, and difficulty in managing research projects.**

Most South Asian university researchers indicated that there was **not much institutional support** to develop research grant funding proposals.

South Asian faculty have strongly indicated (93%) that they would conduct more research, but **do not have the time because** of other commitments to the university –particularly in terms of their teaching and administrative duties.

Thematic analysis of discussion from 4 workshops

Based on the findings of the above research studies, the researchers were asked about what research priorities and methods they found to be most relevant and vital today and what challenges they faced. Several common themes emerged across the three workshops and a few unique responses that were region-specific.

Funding: Across all three regions that the scholars came from, the top challenge outlined was funding. Researchers find funding very hard to come by, and it is not consistent or reliable, and the process is highly competitive. Funding is also usually coming from sources in the Global North, which means they then get to dictate how the research is done, often without considering the Southern researcher's voice, skills, and expertise.



“We can get funding from our university or from local organizations, but it is very competitive, especially if we apply to international organizations. We have to run around a lot for funding” – Participant from East and Southern Africa Workshop

Unequal North/South partnerships: Several participants expressed the unequal power dynamic between them and their Northern counterparts regarding how work is divided and how funding is accessed. Colleagues in the South often do the data collection and fieldwork but don't receive credit for their contributions. Moreover, research priorities and funding criteria were usually set by those in the North, making it particularly challenging and competitive for Southern researchers who try to apply for these opportunities.



Lack of community: Another challenge highlighted was the lack of a robust research community, whether to learn from or collaborate with. Researchers often must rely on colleagues and personal connections outside the region for collaboration, and not enough knowledge gets accrued in the region that can be built.



Lack of time: The final challenge that was spoken about, specific to South Asia, was the administrative burden on researchers within universities. Scholars get pulled in several different directions and have a lot of unrelated responsibilities, taking away their time and focus from doing their research work. This finding is consistent with the IEI's Exploratory case study, where 93% of the study participants expressed, they **do not have the time** because of other commitments to the university.



In general, all participants felt they could be better supported and guided and that being able to share their grievances helped them feel part of a community.

Participants also drew on their own rich experiences and provided recommendations on the most valuable research methods and priorities for other scholars to consider.

“When you are dealing with children with disabilities, it is on us as inclusion researchers to design policies to ethically do the research. When you ask for ethical clearance, we are told “no they are vulnerable”, but we still need to hear their voices. Just because they’re vulnerable, nobody talks to them, and they get left out.” – Participant from East and Southern Africa Workshop

Stakeholders as research partners: When speaking about conducting research, engaging with stakeholders, be it parents, family, or other community members, was brought up as a core aspect of this work. There is a strong need to make sure that stakeholder voices are incorporated into research. This proves to be a rich data source and ensures that the most authentic lived experiences are being represented. It is also equally important to do this ethically, ensuring participants' rights and boundaries are respected.



Inclusive local perspectives: The researchers from sub-Saharan Africa all agreed that there is a dire need to spotlight the African perspective and decolonize both the process of and approach to conducting research. It's crucial to apply a contextual regional lens to the research being undertaken and be guided by research principles that allow for the African perspective to be prioritized instead of a Western or Euro-centric lens. This was particularly highlighted a few times during the West and Central Africa workshop. Researchers felt that their research priorities were influenced and directed strongly by their Northern collaborators and funders.



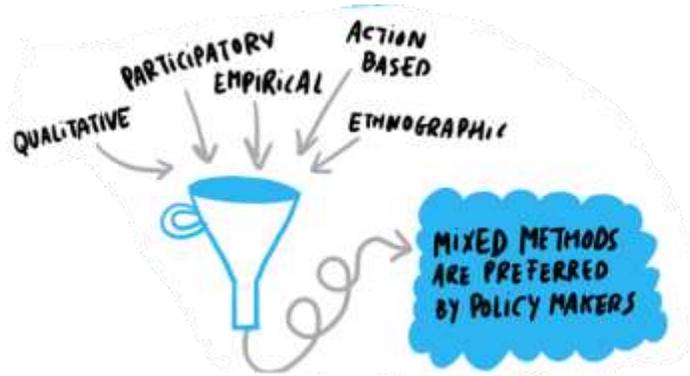
Participants in East and Southern Africa especially felt that teachers weren't prepared with the best materials and pedagogical skills to address students' needs with disabilities. More research needs to be done into the curriculum being taught, how inclusive it is, and whether teachers are appropriately trained and equipped to cater to the myriad needs in their classrooms.



Diverse research methods: Researching with communities requires strong follow-through. This calls for longitudinal studies. Too often, research is limited in how long it spans. Longitudinal studies that follow a student or an intervention over time are crucial to addressing gaps in the system and creating lasting solutions.



Similarly, participants made a strong argument for a **mixed-methods** approach in this field, with scholars arguing that no one way best captures the authentic experiences of people with disabilities. Numeric data alone was found to shut out minorities and their voices. However, the challenge with mixed methods is the additional funding and time required to do it justice. Qualitative research was thought to provide more robust and interesting findings in this context, given its intricacies. There was an agreement that quantitative research is the gold standard and is accepted chiefly to inform policy recommendations and budget allocation.



As part of the appeal for mixed methods, a recommendation was made for **autoethnographic research** where groups of people with disabilities get to share their experiences and stories and be in charge of how they are told. Where participants don't have academic writing skills, researchers can step in.

Participants from both of the Africa workshops talked about how culturally important storytelling is and how researchers should capitalize on this for their work. They recommended using **participatory and emancipatory research methods** and relying on **narrative inquiry** to allow more study participants to represent themselves instead of just data. Allowing the actors themselves to articulate their lived experiences can lead to powerful research outcomes. With the proper ethical clearances, it is essential to include persons with disabilities, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in the study process to ensure accurate representation of all voices.

“Rather than engaging in large scale studies with too much data and surface level analysis, there is merit in doing narrative studies. If we want to come up with policies to really help people, we need to listen to them and really support narrative inquiries-based research.” – Participant from the South Asia Workshop

An interesting question that was asked in one of the groups was, 'Every day, there are many opportunities to do a piece of research – how do I gather evidence?'. This pointed to the fact that every moment in a classroom or community can be an opportunity to document lived experiences, either through conversations or observations. There is immense value to viewing everyday interactions as such. **Action research** can even include asking teachers to maintain diaries and document happenings in the classrooms and learning spaces to create a more robust knowledge repository. There was also a push to utilize the philosophy of Ubuntu, which means "I am because we are." This means that in African philosophy, an individual is human if he or she says I participate, therefore I am. Hence, participation and humanistic values are at the heart of promoting disability inclusion. During both the Africa-based workshops, the use and prioritizing of this philosophy came up, with researchers wanting to employ it in their work to engage with students, families, and community members.



A vital part of the workshop discussions was understanding how the scholars wanted to stay connected and build community. Several participants emphasized the importance of building strong South-South partnerships that would allow them to share research, build upon each other's work, and create collaboration opportunities. The work being done collectively in this group is challenging, and the value of community came out very strongly.

Another critical output that researchers hope for is access to findings and follow-through post submitting research to governing bodies. This was a strong point that came out specifically in the East and Southern African workshop. Several scholars have provided recommendations

to various bodies through their research and want to follow up on what is happening with the recommendations.

“In India, there has been a shift towards data-driven governance and a lot of data is being gathered and provided on dashboards so it’s an opportunity to push the government to also include aspects that are related to persons with disabilities, including children.” – Participant from South Asia Workshop

Sustainability and the road ahead

Unequivocally participants want more opportunities to collaborate and be a part of spaces such as the research exchange. In addition to some of the key challenges that arose during the discussions, like lack of community, access to funding and the lack of opportunity to build South-South partnerships, these responses further emphasized the urgent need to create a space to bring Southern researchers together.

Responding to the emerging recommendations from the participants, the IEI has set up a sub-Community of Practice (CoP) where researchers have an opportunity to feature their research, host discussion threads, and share opportunities for funding, collaboration, and networking. There were many rich discussions on research priorities and research methods during the workshops. The sub-CoP allows for those to continue while also bringing together scholars with similar interests or focus areas. Over 50% of the participants have already joined this forum and are contributing to the conversation and sharing opportunities for further growth.

Additionally, to allow participants to publicize their work as well as to help them stay connected to each other, the Research Exchange has also been utilizing the blogging platform on [IEI's Website](#), '[Words for Inclusion](#)' to run an open call for workshop researcher participants to submit blogs and think pieces based on their original research. [One of the first](#)

Participant Feedback

“The conversations were lively, timely, and insightful. The suggested topics/questions for discussion were very important and engaging.” – Participant from the West and Central Africa workshop.

“The group discussions enabled us to actively contribute and share knowledge, experiences and ideas on the various questions. The workshop enabled me to connect and interact with so many researchers too.” – Participant from the East and Southern Africa workshop

100% of the respondents found the experience to be valuable and have a positive view of the workshop they attended.

[blogs](#) in the series emphasizes the importance of local knowledge in creating policies in disability-inclusive education. The second blog examines the implementation of Deaf Education in Tanzania. The IEI is also building a repository of research by researchers from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Through the larger 2000+ [IEI Community of Practice on Inclusive Education](#), the Sub-Community of Practice for researchers, and the blog platform, we hope to provide a space for our scholars from the Global South to collaborate, listen, learn and share their work to push forward the disability-inclusion education agenda. Thus, while the workshop series may have ended, the connections formed will continue and only further strengthen the vital work being done.