# Multi-country Study on Inclusive Education (MCSIE)

## Recommendations from the Research in Cambodia

June 2023

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# About MCSIE

The MCSIE is the first major, multi-country effort by USAID to investigate what works in supporting children with disabilities to learn to read. The study aims to derive lessons about what works to sustainably advance teaching and learning outcomes for children with disabilities in varying contexts. USAID and its partners will use this information to inform programming in Cambodia, Malawi, and Nepal and plan for new inclusive early grade reading programming globally.

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# MCSIE Key Questions

The study explores the following **key questions**:

**1. Process:** What worked well/poorly in the process of setting up an efficient, effective, and sustainable system to focus on improving the quality of education for learners with disabilities?

**2. Screening and Identification:** What methods worked best to identify learners with disabilities?

**3. Training:** What training model(s) worked best to provide teachers with the resources and support they require to meet the needs of learners with disabilities?

**4. Instruction:** What instructional models worked best to improve classroom instruction and reading outcomes among learners with disabilities?

**5. Unintended Consequences:** Were there any unintended consequences of the activity?
What were they?

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# All Children Reading Cambodia

In two provinces of Cambodia, MCSIE evaluated the work of All Children Reading (ACR)–Cambodia related to inclusive education. ACR–Cambodia was a four-year (2017–2021) activity that delivered early grade Khmer literacy programming to learners from preschool to grade 2, seeking to improve their early grade reading (EGR) abilities. In September 2017 the activity received additional funding to strengthen its approach to inclusive education, resulting in a revised mission to support EGR for all children, including those with disabilities. Some interventions included (1) developing student supplementary books, teachers' guides, and resources for mainstream schools and related resources for braille and Cambodian Sign Language (CSL); (2) providing students who are deaf and hard of hearing with access to basic CSL instruction; (3) conducting school-based hearing and vision screenings for students; and (4) monitoring student learning outcomes through early grade reading assessments (EGRAs).

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# Explore MCSIE Research Area Findings & Recommendations

Within each study question, MCSIE researchers have found emerging themes for future consideration. An overarching recognition is the importance of not looking at each aspect in isolation, but rather along a continuum from process to screening and identification, to teacher training to application of associated instructional approaches.

In this interactive presentation you can explore MCSIE findings in Cambodia and related recommendations along this continuum.

*Select a research area to explore.*



1. Process

2. Screening & Identification

3. Teacher Training

4. Instructional Approaches

The Bridge Program

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Select a research area to explore.

# Process
# Overview

ACR–Cambodia benefited from strong project management that allowed staff to leverage partnerships and communications with government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), families, and community members in a highly collaborative manner, successfully supporting its original aims of large-scale national literacy reform. It faced two key challenges in its expanded mission to strengthen programming for children with disabilities: (1) a national environment where limited inclusive education expertise is available and (2) stakeholders' lack of a shared conceptual understanding of both disability and inclusive education.

## Summary of Recommendations

⊕ Develop a shared understanding of disability and inclusive education early.

⊕ Make disability inclusion the responsibility of all education activity staff.

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# Process Recommendation 1:
## Develop a shared understanding of disability and inclusive education early

### Findings

- Disability was commonly perceived as visible.

- Neither the USAID solicitation nor ACR–Cambodia provided definitions of disability or inclusive education. The lack of shared definitions for these terms allowed stakeholders to form inconsistent interpretations of the project's aims.

- Inclusive education was sometimes perceived as teaching students with disabilities in any setting, even a segregated one.

### Recommendations

- Clearly define key terms in the project design and early in project implementation.

- The disability definition should include hidden disabilities to avoid the misperception that disability is always visible.

- When defining inclusive education emphasize that it applies to all learners in mainstream education settings, even those whose disability cannot be seen, and even where systems are not available to identify hidden disabilities.

> *The barrier of inclusive education in my school and community is not bad because we seem to have no students with disabilities.*
>
> —ACR–Cambodia teacher

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# Process Recommendation 2:
## Make disability inclusion the responsibility of all education activity staff

### Findings

- The ACR–Cambodia inclusion team focused mostly on the Bridge Program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and less on inclusive education in general education classroom contexts.

- Project staff working on inclusive education elements expressed that their work felt separated from the larger picture of inclusive education in the EGR program.

- Some project staff did not see themselves as being responsible for implementing inclusive education and deferred to the inclusive education field team to provide school-level support for learners with disabilities.

- The team members were seldom asked for input on broader teacher training activities or classroom-level support in general education classrooms.

### Recommendations

- Embed inclusion throughout job responsibilities and provide inclusion training to all project staff.

- Create a shared vision among all project staff of the plan to implement inclusive education for all students in general education settings.

- Seek inclusive education staff expertise on broad project activities, not just activities focused on learners with disabilities.

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# Screening and Identification Overview

ACR–Cambodia intended to conduct screening and identification in classrooms, but the activity faced a number of challenges with processes and tools. When several approaches failed to flag learners with hearing or vision difficulties for referral, the activity was open about sharing the challenges, thereby contributing to a global body of knowledge on this issue. Eventually, screening was stopped, and the activity's monitoring and evaluation reporting assumed a 10 percent disability prevalence rate based on national statistics.

## Summary of Recommendations

(+) Recognize limitations of school-based screening and identification and document learning.

(+) If screening and identification pilots are needed, prepare ahead of time for how follow up services will be provided to identified learners.

(+) Continue to provide inclusive education, despite any screening breakdowns or low prevalence rates.

> "For the small numbers of [students with disabilities] found, I think it's good; usually we do not want to have a child with a disability. We know that in some villages, there are no children who are hearing or visually impaired.
>
> —Government stakeholder"

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# Screening Recommendation 1:
## Recognize limitations of school-based screening and identification and document learning

### Findings

- Despite various efforts throughout the project lifetime, ACR–Cambodia was largely unsuccessful in identifying children with hearing or vision disabilities in target communities—a reality acknowledged in its own reporting. As the MCSIE Areas of Intervention Mapping (AIM) for Inclusive Education: Cambodia shows, this was partially linked to systemic national challenges around screening and identification that were not specific to the project.

- ACR–Cambodia hypothesizes that one reason for the low rate of identification was inconsistent screening by teachers, especially when their screening work was not directly supervised (for example, ACR–Cambodia reported that all learners in one class had the same results).

- Screening barriers also included the use of an unreliable hearing screening tool.

- An unintentional result of the screening challenges may be teachers and other stakeholders concluding that learners with disabilities are absent from their classrooms and communities, instead of considering that they have yet to be identified and are present.

### Recommendations

- Screening and identification at the school level is an emergent practice that merits careful consideration in program design. Validated and reliable tools may not be available. In cases like these, pause and reflect on whether screening is necessary to achieve the project aims.

- If using school-based screening, include monitoring to ensure it is carried out according to protocols.

- Document learning and reflect on the long-term consequences of school-based screening and identification to contribute to the knowledge base in the local context.

"

*I used to get trained about the screening tests, but I have never practiced it. If I were asked whether I had done it, I would answer no, but I used to learn about it.*

—Grade 1 teacher

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# Screening Recommendation 2:

If screening and identification pilots are needed, prepare ahead of time for how follow up services and education supports will be provided to identified learners

## Findings

- Prior to implementing screening activities, ACR-Cambodia conducted a mapping of disability services and referral pathways and shared this information with schools. However, teacher survey data suggests that providing information related to existing services did not necessarily lead to the provision of assistive devices.

- Access to medical professionals capable of identifying or diagnosing learners with disabilities in Cambodia is extremely limited, and even if identification does take place, access to the follow-up services required—including both medical and non-medical supports—is lacking.

- Rehabilitation and therapeutic services are concentrated in major cities, and for many typical Cambodians living in rural areas, no therapeutic supports are available within a reasonable distance from their homes.

## Recommendations

- Map disability services and referral pathways in partnership with local disabled persons organizations before piloting screening activities.

- Assess the capacity of disability service providers to meet the needs of identified learners.

- Embed information about existing disability services and referral pathways into school administrator and teacher training, along with clear connections between the identification of disabilities and instructional approaches for including children with disabilities in the classroom.

- Consider partnerships with community and health resources to provide school-based services to children with disabilities.

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# Screening Recommendation 3:
Continue to provide inclusive education despite screening breakdowns or low prevalence rates

## Findings

- Overall, the project identified learners with disabilities at a much lower rate than anticipated, leading ACR–Cambodia to determine that screening activities were largely ineffective.

- Despite the project's intention to link screening with inclusive teaching, the screening breakdowns and other issues meant that no widespread instructional modifications were put into practice for learners with disabilities as a result of screening.

## Recommendations

- Encourage schools and teachers to move forward with inclusive educational practices that are consistent with universal design for learning (UDL), even if screening breakdowns occur.

- Raise awareness of disability diversity to combat misperceptions that disability prevalence is low when screening activities do not yield their intended results.

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# Teacher Training Overview

MCSIE found that ACR–Cambodia delivered a well-coordinated, structured training program that supported teaching of the Khmer EGR package. However, while principles of inclusion consistent with UDL were present in the general training and were embedded into the teaching and learning materials, the explicit training on inclusive education was limited to one dedicated 90-minute in-service session. Teachers were not informed that the other UDL strategies embedded throughout the training and materials were 'inclusive,' in that they could support struggling learners or students with disabilities.

## Summary of Recommendations

⊕ Embed and explicitly identify principles of UDL and inclusive education throughout all pre-service and in-service training.

⊕ Raise teachers' awareness of the possibility of hidden disabilities among learners and the value of inclusive education strategies for all learners.

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# Teacher Training Recommendation 1:

Embed and explicitly identify principles of UDL and inclusive education throughout all pre-service and in-service training

## Findings

- Teacher training agendas indicate that explicit inclusive education coverage was extremely limited, with only one dedicated 90-minute in-service session for grade 1 and 2 training, and none for pre-primary.

- Other UDL strategies were taught throughout the training, but they were not identified as inclusive. When asked what strategies they used to support struggling student populations, teachers did not cite those strategies.

- At the end of the five year activity, ACR–Cambodia teachers who received both inclusive education training and ongoing coaching, and who used the supportive guides, reported feeling more comfortable implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms than control teachers or teachers who only received a short, one-time training.

## Recommendations

- Rather than a single module, integrate UDL and inclusive education instruction across all segments of the teacher training curriculum.

- When training teachers, talk about how inclusive education and UDL can benefit all learners, including learners with disabilities and those who may be struggling.

- Explicitly label UDL and other strategies as inclusive during training based on emerging research[1] that indicates the importance of teacher agency, or self-directed decision making, in the classroom. Clear identification will help to ensure teachers have the ability to apply inclusive strategies when they deem it appropriate to support struggling learners.

" *I . . . attended the training workshop two years ago. I think the training on inclusive education was just one day. I seem to forget about it since it was a long time ago.*

—ACR–Cambodia teacher "

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[1] Li, L., & Ruppar, A. (2021). Conceptualizing Teacher Agency for Inclusive Education: A Systematic and International Review. Teacher Education and Special Education, 44(1), 42–59.

# Teacher Training Recommendation 2:

Raise teachers' awareness of the possibility of hidden disabilities among learners and the value of inclusive education strategies for all learners

## Findings

- ACR–Cambodia training did not emphasize "hidden" disabilities such as learning, speech, or intellectual disabilities.

- The training materials only covered inclusive instructional strategies for students with visible disabilities.

- Most teachers believe disability can be seen by looking at a person; therefore, they often expressed support for inclusion in theory, but claimed it did not currently apply to them because their classes had no students with disabilities.

- MCSIE found that ACR–Cambodia was successful at training teachers to find multiple ways to engage students with lesson content.

- Given the national estimate of 10 percent disability prevalence, it is possible that a portion of the students who were found to be struggling, and who benefitted from ACR–Cambodia interventions, are learners with disabilities.

## Recommendations

- Include the established definitions of and explicit instruction on hidden disabilities in teacher training programs to raise awareness and combat teachers' perceptions that disability must be seen.

- Demonstrate and provide examples of applying UDL and inclusive education strategies and their benefit to all learners, including those with hidden disabilities.

- Prepare teachers, in the absence of knowing learners' disability status, to identify students' individual strengths, interests, and needs and to provide student-centered instruction and support.

> *Personally, I have no difficulties because there are no students with disabilities.*
>
> —ACR–Cambodia teacher

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# Instructional Approaches Overview

Despite the minimal focus on inclusion or UDL during teacher training, inclusive principles were embedded implicitly (and in some cases, explicitly) throughout the ACR–Cambodia teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and teachers within the intervention schools demonstrated capacity to apply them in reading lessons. The endline EGRA showed significant gains among students in ACR–Cambodia project schools. Although students with hidden disabilities are presumed to be present in this population, disaggregated data to confirm that students with disabilities were able to improve their reading skills is unavailable for this population.

## Summary of Recommendations

⊕ Develop and use inclusive TLMs.

⊕ Use a UDL approach to deliver lesson content and assess student learning.

⊕ Use continuous assessment techniques to identify struggling learners and respond with direct action to support them.

> "*Students are active and there is a change between teachers and students, resulting in different learning and teaching habits. Previously, students sat and listened to teachers but now teachers sit and listen to students. Owing to the student-centered method and adequate materials, teachers only raise the problems, and students are the ones who do the activity.*"
>
> —ACR–Cambodia school director

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# Approaches Recommendation 1:
## Develop and use inclusive TLMs

### Findings

- ACR–Cambodia produced materials that were colorful, engaging, accessible, and depicted all types of learners. These qualities made it more likely teachers would use the TLMs to support classroom instruction.

- Beyond developing inclusive materials for all learners, the activity also produced adapted materials for those who use Cambodian Sign Language, braille or large print.

- ACR–Cambodia teachers had access to more TLMs and also used TLMs more during lessons, compared with control teachers. This is important because, globally, the availability of quality TLMs is correlated with better student reading outcomes.

### Recommendations

- Develop TLMs that are colorful, engaging, accessible, and that represent diverse populations, and assess their inclusiveness.[2]

- Consider developing inclusive materials for all learners alongside materials adapted for those with specific needs.

- Engage many stakeholders, including local government, in TLM development to increase contextual appropriateness and promote host country buy-in and ownership.

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[2] Tools such as the Guidance for Promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Checklist can be useful.

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# Approaches Recommendation 2:
## Use a UDL approach to deliver lesson content and assess student learning

### Findings

- ACR–Cambodia teachers were 60 percent more likely than control teachers to accept multiple ways for students to engage with lesson content and show their understanding, including checking students' understanding throughout the lesson.

- ACR–Cambodia teachers' ability to check students' understanding throughout lessons and invite them to show their grasp of new concepts in a variety of ways was greater than in control schools. This is an important approach to reach more learners, including those who prefer not to respond verbally.[3]

- The project team embedded implicitly and explicitly inclusive instructional strategies within teacher guides and supplementary materials, including regular use of small group work, presenting content in multiple ways, and facing students while speaking loudly and clearly. This approach helped to support the application of these strategies in lesson delivery.

### Recommendations

- Use multiple teaching approaches to deliver lesson content and illustrate concepts through pictures, games, songs, activities, and small group and pair work.

- Provide students with a range of options to demonstrate learning, such as writing, drawing, and using images; using Cambodian Sign Language; pointing or using gestures; or through individual check-ins with teachers.

- Embed inclusive instructional strategies within teacher guides and supplementary materials, and train coaches to support the application of these strategies, which benefit all learners.

" *In the past, when we asked them, they did not dare raise their hands to answer our questions because they were afraid of the teacher blaming them [if they answer incorrectly], but now they compete with others to raise their hands to answer the questions; whether they know it or not, they dared to answer the teacher's questions.*

—ACR–Cambodia school director "

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[3] Hayes, A., Turnbull, A., and Moran, N. (2018). Universal Design for Learning to Help All Children Read: Promoting Literacy for Learners with Disabilities (First Edition). Washington, D.C.: USAID.

# Approaches Recommendation 3:

Use continuous assessment techniques to identify struggling learners and respond with direct action to support them

## Findings

- ACR–Cambodia emphasized continuous assessment through a range of approaches during teacher training. These assessments provided built-in opportunities for teachers to know which learners were grasping lesson content or falling behind and to what extent.

- Teachers supported struggling learners by providing additional practice, repetition, and individual attention; arranging preferential seating; increasing the font size of learning materials; and encouraging parental support.

## Recommendations

- Train teachers and reinforce classroom use of skills and tools to identify struggling learners and to respond with inclusive techniques to support them. Creating an inclusive learning environment helps to ensure that learners who struggle—due to a disability or for any other reason—are not left behind their peers.

- Ensure that teacher training and teachers' guides provide frequent prompts or cues to assess students' understanding, such as homework checks, writing exercises, or observing small group work.

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# Bridge Program Overview

The Bridge Program supported 14 young learners in Kampong Thom who are deaf and did not previously have access to any form of education. The original aim was to support these learners to transition (or "bridge") into integrated classes within their local schools; however, the national government was unprepared to employ integrated teachers locally, and the students ended up going to residential schools in another province. MCSIE found that Bridge required significant resources in relation to the number of beneficiaries, but it made a significant impact on the lives of the children it served.

## Summary of Recommendations

- Consult the deaf community early and plan for enough time when designing deaf education curricula and materials.

- Involve families in literacy activities for deaf and hard-of-hearing children.

- Carefully consider what consequences may ensue from creating pilot or stand-alone disability-inclusion initiatives if they are not sustained.

> " The key behavioral change noted by the team is that parents of children in the [Bridge and integrated classrooms] are now expecting, and in some cases even demanding, that their children receive quality education. This feedback is in stark contrast to attitudes in the early months of the project, when parents did not feel that there were any viable learning pathways for their deaf children.
>
> —RTI International's ACL–Cambodia Final Report "

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# Bridge Program Recommendation 1:
## Involve the deaf community early and plan for enough time when designing deaf education curricula and materials

### Findings

- There are multiple sign languages used in Cambodia, which posed challenges for ACR–Cambodia in developing a curriculum for the Bridge Program.

- To determine a way forward, ACR–Cambodia formed a Cambodian Sign Language (CSL) committee of deaf individuals representing different viewpoints. However, this process required a considerable amount of time.

### Recommendations

- Anticipate and plan for the need to engage with the local deaf community around deaf education curriculum design.

- Always place people who are deaf at the forefront of designing sign language curricula.

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# Bridge Program Recommendation 2:
## Involve families in literacy activities for deaf and hard of hearing children

### Findings

- Bridge students and their families accessed CSL education for the first time in their lives, and the families described CSL communication as invaluable and transformative.

- The family approach not only improved literacy skills for the learner and their family, but also improved communication within the home and in the community.

- When schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bridge students and their families were provided with tablets and funds for Internet connections to support learning at home with access to a virtual tutor.

### Recommendations

- Train families to acquire local signed languages along with their children.

- Encourage home-based learning among family members and their children to support sign language acquisition.

- Consider the use of technology, including pre-recorded videos and virtual tutoring, to support students who are deaf and live in remote communities.

"
*I could see that many students improved a lot. They were braver, dared to ask, answer, and communicate with each other much better than before.*

—ACR–Cambodia deaf education specialist
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# Bridge Program Recommendation 3:
Carefully consider what consequences may ensue from creating pilot or stand-alone disability-inclusion initiatives if they are not sustained

## Findings

- The Bridge Program required significant human and financial resources and seldom overlapped with other ACR-Cambodia project activities.

- While ACR-Cambodia included an exit strategy for the Bridge Program and a transition of Bridge students to integrated classrooms to ensure sustainability, the transition of Bridge students to national, residential special schools marked the end of the community-based deaf education model and required students to live far from home.

- The reluctance of government to fund a sustained model for Bridge students to study in their home communities sheds light on the role that national systems play in sustaining inclusive education efforts.

## Recommendations

- Consider sustainability early and often. Sustainability in resource-intensive inclusion initiatives is a broad challenge, but does not mean that initiatives should not be pursued.

- Engage with government counterparts early and regularly to build understanding of piloted initiatives, and support governments to progressively dedicate adequate funds to inclusive education efforts over time.

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# Summary

ACR-Cambodia's legacy, both its successes and challenges, offer rich knowledge for a global community of practice interested in inclusive education, a relatively new field of focus in international development. ACR-Cambodia had numerous successful practices, such as its collaborative approach with government, development of high quality TLMs, and focus on doing no harm to children with disabilities. ACR-Cambodia also helped to shed light on lessons learned for future projects, including recommendations that can help inform design and implementation. Examples of lessons learned include the importance of embedding inclusion throughout a project team's roles and responsibilities and providing explicit rather than implicit training to teachers on universal design for learning (UDL) principles.

To learn more, see the Areas of Intervention Mapping for Cambodia and related case studies on the USAID Education Links site.