Inclusive Futures
Promoting disability inclusion

UKaid
from the British people

Centring children with disabilities in teaching

Lessons from Inclusive Futures' education projects

March 2025

Contents

3 Executive summary

6 Our inclusive education projects

7 Context

8 Methodology

9 Five ways to support teachers to deliver inclusive education

23 Conclusion

Executive summary

Teachers have a crucial role in children's education, but too few are trained in how to teach children with diverse learning needs in one classroom. Children with disabilities enrolled in schools often end up learning less, missing more classes, or dropping out. To provide inclusive education, teacher training must equip teachers with the attitudes, knowledge and skills to teach local children with disabilities in the same classroom as their peers.

Inclusive Futures is UK aid's flagship disability inclusion initiative. Since 2018, we have worked to remove barriers to learning for children with disabilities, focusing on primary and pre-primary age children in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria and Tanzania. Inclusive Futures is a consortium of development and humanitarian organisations, disability inclusion specialists, and experts working in media, research, and academia. We trial innovative approaches and partner with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) to improve the lives of people with disabilities, creating tangible results, and generating learning about what works, what doesn't and why.

We've found ways to offer comprehensive support for teachers through training, mentoring and reflection – acknowledging the challenges many schools face, including limited budgets and time for teacher training, large class sizes, and scarce teaching materials. We found teachers in our projects benefitted from learning directly from organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs), mentorship and the support of school-based inclusion teams. Proactive safeguarding, connecting with inclusive referral services, and feedback from inclusion-trained education inspectors helped to embed changes.

Social inclusion at school can be as important as learning outcomes for children with disabilities. We found that awareness raising, social events and integration of children with and without disabilities helped to change attitudes towards inclusion in schools.

Drawing on our findings from delivering Inclusive Futures' education projects, **this document discusses five practical steps that education providers can take to improve teachers' skills and knowledge in inclusive pedagogy**.

> "It's about including children with disabilities, making them feel part of society – enhancing their social interactions, increasing their learning potential and giving them the right, full support when needed.
>
> **Sherifat, Teacher, Kaduna State, Nigeria.**

Sherifat, a teacher trained through our inclusive education project in Nigeria.

Use targeted in-service teacher training

This is a great start for teachers to learn how to include children with disabilities in their classrooms. Any training needs to work with their schedules and personal motivations, and the choice of training method needs to take time, scale, cost and quality into account.

Establish and strengthen mentoring systems

Don't wait until teachers ask for mentoring – plan for it from the beginning. Inclusion mentors can be a relatively low-resource way to enhance teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy, improving the quality of teaching to the benefit all students, including children with disabilities.

Prepare to offer responsive follow-up support

Offer tailored follow-ups, refresher trainings, create or connect to a network of inclusion peers, and recognise and celebrate the progress that teachers make, while being considerate of the depth of technical skill that a teacher can be expected to master.

Strengthen the network of inclusion partners around teachers

Disability inclusive education should sit within and strengthen existing education systems. Train education inspectors to add disability inclusion to their monitoring checklist and bring OPDs on board as key inclusion partners.

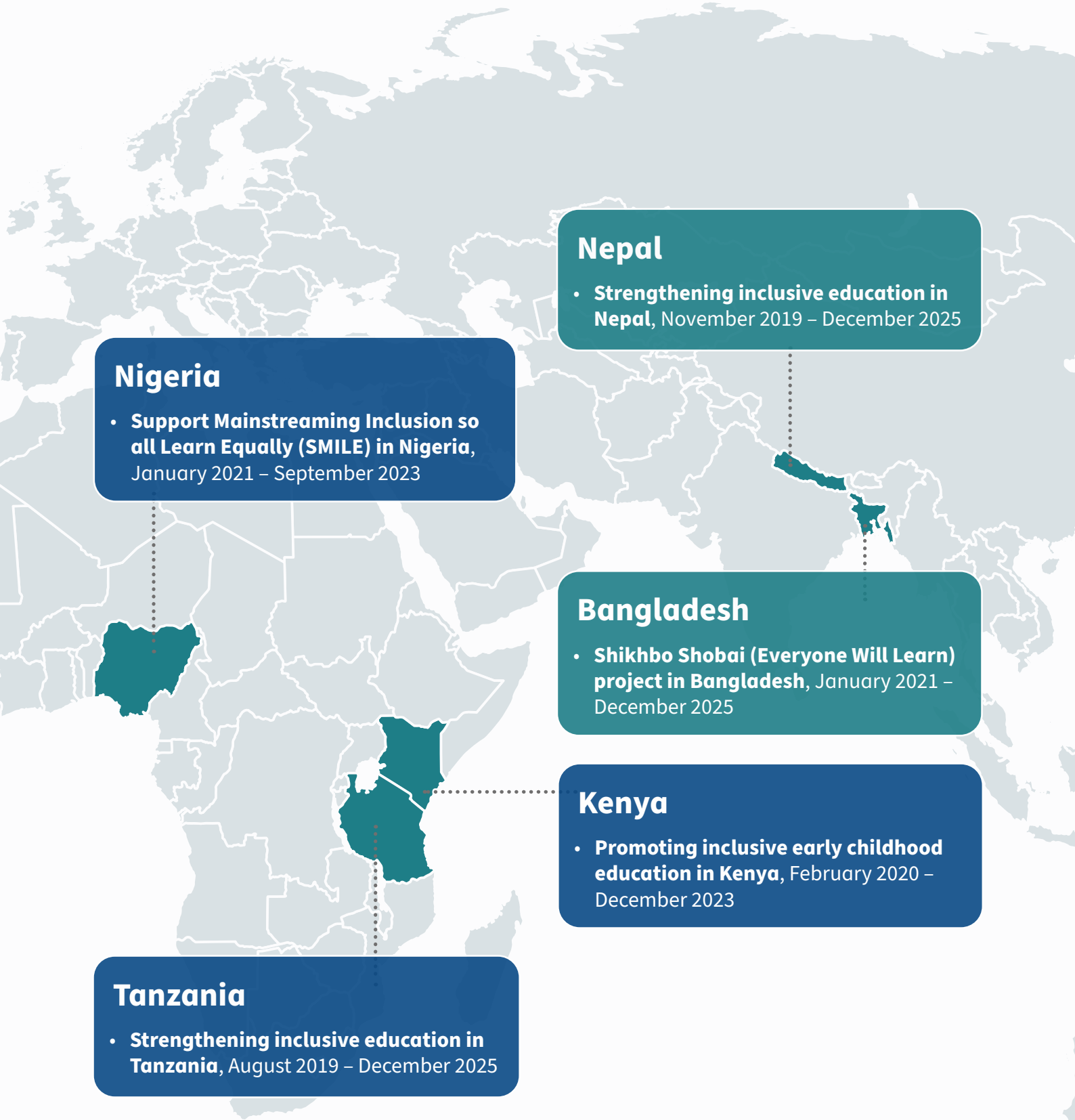
Reinforce inclusion in the school environment

Invest in inclusion-focused learning support assistants, itinerant teachers, and a school-based inclusion team. Connect with and strengthen social protection systems to support and protect all children, including children with disabilities.

This learning report is for two main audiences: education providers (humanitarian and education organisations, government and funding bodies); and inclusion organisations – including organisations of persons with disabilities – who are looking to partner with the education sector.

Supporting teachers to welcome children with disabilities is only one part of the journey towards inclusive education, and this learning piece is one in a series which covers select topics. To read Inclusive Futures' other learning in this series, please visit: **inclusivefutures.org/including-children-with-disabilities-at-school**

Our inclusive education projects



Nepal

- **Strengthening inclusive education in Nepal**, November 2019 – December 2025

Nigeria

- **Support Mainstreaming Inclusion so all Learn Equally (SMILE) in Nigeria**, January 2021 – September 2023

Bangladesh

- **Shikhbo Shobai (Everyone Will Learn) project in Bangladesh**, January 2021 – December 2025

Kenya

- **Promoting inclusive early childhood education in Kenya**, February 2020 – December 2023

Tanzania

- **Strengthening inclusive education in Tanzania**, August 2019 – December 2025

Context

> Inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all.
>
> UNICEF[1]

All children have a right to education without discrimination.[2] An inclusive education lays the foundations for a positive life course: children with disabilities who attend school are more likely to go on to enjoy good health, work and feel part of society.[3]

However, despite global commitments to inclusive education,[4] in most low- and middle-income countries children with disabilities are still more likely to be out of school than any other group of children.[5] Barriers to enrolment include fear of stigma – leaving some caregivers to keep children with disabilities at home, misconceptions about the learning capabilities of children with disabilities, the need for private transport or accompaniment to school putting a time or financial pressure on caregivers, and the intersection of disability and poverty – forcing parents to choose how many children they can afford to send to school. Children with multiple and complex disabilities are particularly likely to be missing from the classroom.[6] Schools might not be proactive in enrolling children with disabilities, citing overcrowded classrooms, potentially unsafe or inaccessible access to WASH facilities, and – crucially – the lack of trained teachers, as reasons not to welcome children with disabilities.

When they do make it into the classroom, children with disabilities are more likely to learn less, miss more classes, and drop out, compared to their peers.[7] Children from poorer families are likely to come away less literate and numerate, and girls with disabilities face double discrimination if attitudes to both disability and gender are not addressed.[8]

Teachers are at the frontline of addressing the barriers that many children with disabilities face to gain an education.

Pre-service teacher training, which every teacher must complete, should ideally equip teachers with knowledge about disability, embed inclusive attitudes, and develop their skills to prepare lessons that meet national education targets while meeting the diverse learning needs and abilities of each child in their classroom. In practice, much pre-service teacher training falls woefully short in preparing teachers' attitudes, skills and knowledge to create an inclusive learning environment that includes children with disabilities. The opportunity to improve the experience of education for all, through teaching inclusive pedagogy, is currently being missed.

Methodology

This learning report is based on practical experiences of delivery, the result of a mixed methods learning review:

- Three-day learning workshop with the Inclusive Futures Inclusive Education Working Group including consortium partners, project management teams and OPD representatives (October 2023)
- 10 reflection discussions with project management and implementing teams and OPD partners, facilitated by an external consultant (April 2024)
- Five peer learning interviews conducted by the Inclusive Futures Inclusive Education Working Group (May 2024)
- Desk review of project learning reports, summarised and collated for analysis (July 2024)
- 19 key informant interviews with OPD partners, government education officials, teachers, and caregivers involved in project delivery (May to August 2024)

Acknowledgements

The authors of this piece are Chloe Cheeseman and Lisa Morris, with technical guidance and review from Claire Walsh, Chris Elliott, Holly Towner, Johannes Trimmel and Veronica Stapleton, and administrative support from Heidi Bloomfield, Megha Bharadwa and Pauline Bokea. Published with gratitude to the Inclusive Futures Inclusive Education Working Group and those who generously contributed their time and insights through focus groups, key informant interviews, and technical reviews, including: ADD International, Centre for Disability and Development, Humanity and Inclusion, Light for the World, National Federation for the Deaf Nepal, Sense International and Sightsavers.

Five ways to support teachers to deliver inclusive education

1 Use targeted in-service teacher training

Investing in teachers' capacity will benefit the children they are teaching. The more skilled and prepared teachers are to plan and deliver learning in ways that meet the variety of students in their classroom, the greater the potential for increased learning outcomes – including for students with disabilities. Using teacher training to set an inclusive foundation is therefore the first ideal step. In Inclusive Futures, we were able to influence what happened in the classroom, after pre-service training.

We first spoke with school leaders and teachers about their understanding, skills, attitudes, and aspirations for inclusive education, as part of a training needs assessment. Next, we co-designed curricula for in-service teacher training, in alignment with government education departments and with guidance from OPDs. We were aiming to build teachers' skills in inclusive pedagogy, with the desired result of an improved learning experience for all learners. We made sure that any new techniques could be integrated into existing teaching practice, rather than suggesting radically different or unrealistic approaches.

Topics covered with in-service teacher training included:

- Principles and benefits of inclusive education
- Relevant legislation on inclusion rights and responsibilities
- How to identify and screen children with disabilities
- Inclusive classroom management and multisensory teaching methods, including universal design and play-based learning
- Using individual educational plans to support children with specific learning needs
- Safeguarding and gender inclusion

Designing and delivering in-service teacher training can be a major time and resource investment, so we explored what worked well – or not so well – in the different training approaches we took.

What worked well with this approach?

Cascade training

In Tanzania, to align with the national education system, we used a cascade approach for the initial in-service training. We trained a small selection of trainers from teachers' colleges alongside government education officers. These participants were then designated as 'master trainers' who could cascade the training to 48 head teachers, who cascaded the training onwards to over 700 teachers throughout their schools. This approach allowed us to reach a large number of teachers with a relatively low investment in training by utilising existing hierarchies to build ownership.[9] However, we received feedback that the training needed to be followed up with ongoing mentoring and peer-learning to embed application.

Intensive training

In our inclusive education project in Nepal, we selected 12 schools to receive intensive support, training nearly 100% of the teachers in these schools. This cadre of teachers created a 'hive' who could work together in each school to problem-solve

inclusion challenges as they arose. While this approach was cost and time intensive, making it challenging to replicate at scale, it deliberately created strong examples of what can be achieved in inclusive education, which proved useful in national-level advocacy and future programme design.

Remote training

In Kenya, in response to Covid-19 restrictions, small groups of teachers gathered in one space, with the trainer attending remotely, online. Remote or digital delivery can raise questions about levels of learner participation and engagement, yet we found that the small group of teachers who learnt in peer groups supported each other's learning after the trainer 'logged off'. Having an education official or senior education person present in the teacher group during the training also worked well. This person offered additional explanations and support and then acted as a mentor who stayed connected with the group as they stepped back into the classroom.

Roll-out manuals

Together with OPDs and technical specialists, we developed inclusive teacher training manuals and guidance documents to support schools and education departments to roll out inclusive teacher training.[10] Guidance documents for teachers included a range of practical inclusion advice, such as processes for identification and screening of students with disabilities, tips on organising the classroom for accessibility, and options for tailoring the existing curriculum to be more accessible. These manuals were used by schools when new teachers arrived, or for refresher training, or for schools not involved in the Inclusive Futures programme. This approach is low-resource and easily scalable and repeatable, aiming to overcome the common challenge of staff turnover post-training. However, the quality of the training from the manual depends as much on the trainer as on the content, making it difficult to guarantee quality.

> "In my class I have fifteen learners with disabilities. I handle them together with the others and through the training, I'm able to handle them.
>
> **Karen, a teacher at an Inclusive Futures project school in Homa Bay, Kenya**

Good practice when designing in-service teacher training:

- **Be flexible to teachers' time and availability.** Time for in-service training was heavily restricted based on teachers' already-demanding schedules and needed sign-off from education authorities. Consequently, initial training workshops ranged in depth across our projects, from a single day (Bangladesh) to a five-day course (Nigeria), and a series of workshops spread over several weeks (Nepal). We worked carefully with government and school officials to organise training workshops after school, at weekends, and during half-term breaks where possible
- **Understand motivation.** Teacher motivation and participation varied across sites. In some areas, teachers were initially reluctant to attend training, citing time pressures or expressing scepticism about the need for inclusion training. Addressing teachers' concerns is an honest way to build engagement and motivation. We found that motivation increased when the training could be formally certified as part of teachers' professional development, which we achieved in Nigeria through collaboration with the National Teachers Institute
- **Prioritise content.** With guidance from education officials, OPDs and training needs assessments, we prioritised essential points to cover, then later delivered additional training as and when needed
- **Training design.** With the support of local education officials, we prepared training that was clear for teachers to understand and relevant to local education systems, with a relaxed delivery style open to all questions from teachers
- **Don't make it a one-off.** Due to the short timeframe for in-service training, teachers needed more time than was available to understand inclusive education practices before they started to apply them in the classroom. This meant that follow-up support and guidance was particularly important

Key learning: In-service inclusion training with teachers is a great start for teachers to learn how best include children with disabilities in their classrooms. It needs to work with their schedules and personal motivations, and the choice of training method needs to take time, scale, cost and quality into account.

Sophia and her sons Isaya and Elia at their house in Shinyanga, Tanzania after a school day.

2 Establish and strengthen mentoring systems

A second consistent learning is the value of mentors in supporting teachers to apply inclusive education. Mentors in the Inclusive Futures programme reinforced points from in-service inclusion training and guided teachers through the practical and everyday experiences of teaching with children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom.

Mentoring schemes are recognised as providing significant value to teachers, improving and assuring the quality of what they can offer in a classroom, ultimately benefitting students' learning experience and outcomes.[11] However, countries vary by the extent to which a scheme is integrated into early years education systems.[12] In some contexts where mentoring schemes in schools already existed, we introduced disability inclusion. In other contexts, we established inclusion mentors and sought to link this up with existing education authority good practice, such as monitoring visits.

Regardless of who offers teachers mentoring and guidance, it is essential that they understand and value inclusion and have education expertise and experience.

What worked well with this approach?

We found that individuals from diverse backgrounds have different strengths as inclusion mentors:

- OPD members offered teachers valuable insights from their lived experiences of education into the benefits of having different approaches for learners with disabilities
- Retired teachers and headteachers had relatable experiences of teaching and could offer advice based on personal understanding of the local challenges for teachers
- Current and retired government education officials understood education systems and their advice and recommendations were well-respected by teachers

These mentors visited teachers at work and provided practical guidance about how they could meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some offered hands-on demonstrations of adaptive tools and teaching resources, providing individualised support, and responding to teacher questions with their real-life experience and expertise. This is particularly useful when addressing the diverse needs of children with disabilities, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to inclusive education, and teachers will not have specialist training on every disability or how it can present in a classroom. **On getting to know each child, chatting to their caregiver, and then to a mentor, teachers in our pilot schools were better equipped to prepare appropriate learning activities, aligning class curricula and national learning outcomes with individual needs.**[13]

As an adaptive programme, we did not initially plan to use mentors. When the need arose, we responded to it, but this meant some of our mentoring schemes were voluntary or had minimal financial incentives for mentors to take part. Nevertheless, we found that mentoring roles for teachers were popular, and volunteer mentors continued their roles with commitment over the course of the programme. Mentors explained that they felt motivated by holding a position of responsibility and their desire to help their community.

To ensure consistent and appropriate feedback about disability inclusion, we developed observation tools in partnership with education officials for mentors to use when joining a teacher in a classroom and offered inclusion training for mentors. For sustainability in future projects, we would aim to develop clearer guidelines for mentors, work with national education authorities to identify budget for long-term schemes, and plan to include mentors as part of an inclusive education package right from the beginning.

Key learning: Don't wait until teachers ask for mentoring, plan for it from the beginning. Inclusion mentors can be a relatively low-resource way to enhance teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy, improving the quality of learning in a classroom for all, including children with disabilities.

Case study: Strengthening inclusive mentoring in Nepal

In Nepal, mentoring was a critical part of in-service support for teachers to develop their inclusive education practices. However, the need for mentors was not part of the design at the beginning. We quickly realised mentors could help roll out good practice and follow up after in-service inclusion training with teachers in schools. This limited the risk of teachers reverting to old practices rather than the new and inclusive techniques they had been trained in.

The local government education department recommended volunteer mentors from a pool of retired teachers and headteachers, social workers, community leaders, and government education officials. Equipped with an inclusion observation checklist, the mentors visited schools regularly. They provided on-the-spot support to teachers delivering lessons, and to school-based management committees (SBMCs) who were keeping an overview of the whole school approach to inclusion. Mentors reported increased use of teaching and learning materials amongst the teachers they worked with, and supported the SBMCs to complete mandatory school improvement plans with consideration for disability inclusion, making them eligible for local authority funding.

The mentoring scheme provided a successful approach which we advocated for the government to replicate. We have since worked closely with the government towards establishing a mentoring scheme in support of inclusive education, along with associated guidelines. These guidelines will include the selection and role of mentors for inclusive education, how to deliver onsite mentoring and continuous teacher support, and how mentors could help teachers and schools to access further inclusive education resources.

Teachers take part in a practical training in Nepal.

3 Prepare to offer responsive follow-up support

“

Following our inclusive education training, we benefitted from ongoing professional development opportunities... the support from inclusive education specialists has been invaluable. They offered tailored advice on adapting lessons, using assistive technologies, and creating a supportive learning environment.

Altaf Hossain, Primary school head teacher, Bangladesh

The package of in-service training and mentoring still was not sufficient to embed the depth of disability inclusive skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for every teacher.

With a focus on improving the capacity of education providers to include children with disabilities in their classrooms, we trialled a mix of further approaches, including refresher training, learning and reflection meetings, online peer support and multi-school events. Importantly, these approaches were responsive or opportunistic – based on teacher requests and integrated as part of on-the-job support.

What worked well with this approach?

Refresher training

Short, responsive refresher training provided the opportunity to go in-depth on specific topics requested by teachers, including adapting Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) and completing Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

However, as with initial training, refresher training required significant resources to organise, deliver and attend, and to be effective, needed to take place semi-regularly. Teachers often requested support in areas beyond Inclusive Futures’ capacity, such as tailored training for specialised assistive technologies and languages such as braille

typewriters and local sign language. The skills required for a teacher can vary according to context and classroom, so the most practical approach was to work with teachers and children with disabilities to understand their classroom experience and equip them as best as possible.

Learning and reflection meetings

Integrating learning and reflection into existing teacher meetings was another sustainable approach to embedding disability inclusion amongst teachers.

In Tanzania, school-based inclusion teams ran regular meetings.[14] These meetings were attended by teachers with a range of inclusion experience, inclusive education support staff from the local education authority, and at times parents of children with disabilities. In these meetings, teachers shared their experiences in applying inclusive education, with input from other attendees about how to address or overcome certain classroom scenarios. Teachers told us that these learning meetings improved their knowledge and confidence about using inclusive teaching approaches and welcoming children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Topics teachers wanted to discuss included:

- **Capacity:** With full schedules, many teachers had limited time to consider new inclusive approaches as they planned lessons. There was a fear that it would create more work, such as the preparation and record-keeping needed for Individual Education Plans
- **Practice:** Some teachers did not immediately identify any students with disabilities or other learning needs in their classes or did not have any new children with disabilities enrolled, so they did not recognise any opportunities to apply their training
- **Behaviour:** Some teachers with large class sizes of over sixty students experienced challenges with managing more diverse classrooms, including responding to bullying of children with disabilities
- **Lesson planning:** Teachers were keen to apply new strategies, such as bringing in 'learning corners' and teaching with a multisensory approach, and were unsure how to plan for this in detail

Online peer support

Learning about inclusive education is an opportunity to build a network of educators, and for teachers to professionally develop. We built communities of learning and reinforced them where they already existed. One new space was through online chat groups on teachers' phones. These chat groups on a popular app included teachers, inclusion trainers, and project staff. They created a space for frequent and informal communication, peer suggestions, and ongoing guidance and motivation from inclusion trainers and project staff. They were low-effort to maintain, peer-led, specific to local contexts, and strengthened the network of teachers in a local area focused on inclusive education.

Multi-school events

To connect and celebrate the network of teachers committed to practicing inclusive education, we also organised community and multi-school events. These events included teachers from the Inclusive Futures' pilot schools, as well as teachers from schools not involved in the programme, SBMC members and figureheads in the community. The aim was to facilitate exchange between teachers with different levels of experience and exposure to inclusive education, with experienced teachers sharing successes, good practice, and strategies. The public events aimed to establish the teachers' reputation as dedicated inclusion professionals, celebrate their commitment and progress, and create a ripple effect of support for inclusive education in schools and the community.

Key learning: Responsive support can help keep teachers motivated to apply and expand their inclusion skills as they respond to new or unique classroom opportunities and challenges. Create or connect to a network of inclusion peers, and recognise and celebrate the progress that teachers make, while being considerate of the depth of technical skill that a teacher can be expected to master.

Case study: Supporting play-based inclusive teaching in Kenya

In both Kakuma refugee camp and Homa Bay District, Kenya, we used learning and reflection meetings to help teachers implement inclusive teaching approaches.

We connected teachers directly with inclusion experts through quarterly project meetings. At these meetings, teachers exchanged ideas and success stories about applying inclusive approaches, and used the time to problem-solve issues.

One issue that teachers raised was around the use of play-based teaching and learning materials to accommodate a diversity of learning needs. After engaging in inclusion training, teachers had trialled using play-based methods, embracing the understanding that young children learn through play, and that play can be used to teach content within the national curriculum.

However, teachers had relatively small teaching spaces for large numbers of students, and limited spare time between classes to prepare inclusive, play-based group learning activities. Play-based learning requires time for exploration and experimentation, which some teachers' schedules did not seem to have space for. Schools also had limited space to store materials securely and teachers found that some were being removed from the classroom after school hours and damaged. These meetings generated creative ideas for using inclusive approaches with the time and resource constraints, such as using outdoor areas for play-based teaching activities.

Bradon, a teacher in Homa Bay, Kenya supports children in his class who are playing with modelling clay.

4 Strengthen the network of inclusion partners around teachers

We explored the network around teachers of education authorities and regulators and worked to unite them around disability inclusion. We brought these partners in through training and co-design to strengthen their capacity to uphold inclusion when they interacted with teachers during school visits. This helped to reinforce teachers' capacity to teach in an inclusive way, benefitting all children in their classrooms.

Inclusive Futures' consortium partners and OPD representatives from our inclusive education project in Bangladesh.

What worked well with this approach?

OPDs

People with disabilities and their representative organisations (OPDs) were meaningfully involved throughout the Inclusive Futures programme.[15] This partnership meant that any support for teachers was informed not just by education experts but also by inclusion experts, keeping content accurate and appropriate, and upholding the inclusion value of meaningful participation and 'nothing about us without us'. Schools and teachers responded positively to the involvement of OPDs, and OPD members' prominent leadership, expertise and candour about their personal experiences of education challenged stereotypes and demonstrated the potential of inclusive teaching.

When working with OPDs as well as other technical experts on an inclusive education project, we needed to clarify each partner's roles and responsibilities. For example, OPDs are inclusion experts based on their lived experience of disability but might not be education experts.[16] Clear roles, communication and strong partnerships were essential to success.

Aligning with education authorities

Supporting teachers to deliver inclusive education can and should build on existing education support systems. This alignment aims to sustain inclusion and improve teacher capacity at scale, for the benefit of every child.

Working alongside schools and education officials, we explored routes for teacher training that would integrate with existing systems for professional development. For example, an inclusive education in-service teacher training becoming part of recognised continued professional development for teachers, or inclusion standards being embedded in national teacher training curricula.

One route we found success with is through the routine checks conducted by education authorities and/or education inspectorates. Education inspectors attended our in-service teacher training alongside teachers. This meant that when the inspectors conducted routine monitoring visits to schools, they were able to provide feedback about the standard of inclusion, reinforcing what teachers had learned in the training. In Tanzania, we worked with the local government education department to design a classroom observation tool based on key elements of inclusive teaching, to be used on regular school visits and inspections. This allowed any monitoring and feedback to focus on supporting the teacher's capacity in disability inclusion, rather than policing their work.

Key learning: Disability inclusive education should sit within and strengthen existing education systems. Training education inspectors to add disability inclusion to their monitoring checklist and bringing OPDs on board as key inclusion partners, helps to reinforce good practice for teachers within the classroom, and offers the potential for sustainability by embedding it in elements of a wider system.

"Initially in my career, I have not worked with any organisation with people with disabilities but through this project in Kakuma I think it is an eye-opener for me as an educationist. We have looked at the nitty-gritty of education, how do we work, how do we partner, how do we collaborate, how do we look for resources.

Joseph Munyes, sub-county education officer, Turkana County government, Kenya

Case study: OPD partnerships in Kaduna state, Nigeria

In Kaduna state, Nigeria, OPDs provided guidance to teachers about inclusive education, bringing insights from their personal experience to support in-service training. OPDs visited schools early in the project to establish positive relationships. At these visits, OPDs gathered information about teachers' needs, promoted the benefits of inclusive education and explained the importance of in-service training and ongoing support and mentoring to establish skills in inclusive pedagogy. They used persuasive examples from their own experience. They also took part in monitoring and support visits to schools alongside project teams and education officials, which helped inform additional guidance and responsive support for teachers on inclusive practices.

> "The fact that OPD partners were going to be a part of this [inclusive education project] from the inception gave me excitement. Why? Because it meant we were going to express our feelings, we were going to bring our ideas. Our personal feelings, our personal ideas that we had in school [about] what was right and what was wrong, we were going to share it with the team, and that would improve the implementation of the project."

David Okon, OPD representative, Nigeria

© Sightsavers

Teachers, OPD representatives and learners take part in an activity for Children's Day in Nigeria.

5 Reinforce inclusion in the school environment

“

Every learner, regardless of disability, needs a fair and empowered education journey and deserves a nurturing and accepting environment that cherishes their individuality.

Charles Abich, Chair of the Education Committee of Homabay County Disability Forum, an organisation of people with disabilities, Kenya

There are limits to what a single teacher in a classroom can achieve, no matter how well trained, mentored or monitored they are. To achieve meaningful inclusion in the classroom, teachers need a supportive working environment in schools, with inclusive policies and strong connections to referral partners. We did this by working with school-based inclusion teams, learning support assistants, itinerant teachers, and connecting with referral services.

What worked well with this approach?

School-based inclusion teams

Where they didn’t already exist, we established school-based inclusion teams (SBITs).[17] These teams are formed of school leaders, teacher representatives, OPDs and caregivers, and are set up to guide the delivery of inclusion measures in their school. We worked with OPDs and schools to train these teams on inclusive education, so they could be a source of inclusion help and advice for teachers to draw on. What worked well was gaining the support of leaders in the school and local authorities to work with this new structure. Some schools with existing inclusion specialists also found that the SBITs helped to concentrate any inclusion questions from teachers.

Learning support assistants and itinerant teachers

To reinforce teacher capacity and knowledge about inclusion, we worked with learning and teaching support staff in the classroom.

Where budget allowed, we invested in learning support assistants (LSAs) to offer additional or tailored instruction to individual children, indirectly supporting the teacher to keep the class learning together.[18] LSAs mainly worked directly with children with disabilities and their caregivers, but also supported teachers in preparing learning materials and completing records. However, any LSA requires funding to pay for their time and expertise, and our pilots worked best with full-time LSAs, making this approach less achievable for schools and authorities with limited inclusion budgets.

Building on systems already in place, we also engaged itinerant teachers where they existed, to provide surge support. After intensive training, itinerant teachers guided teachers about how to adapt curricula and teaching and learning materials and develop Individual Education Plans (IEPs).[19] However, in contexts where used them, such as Nepal, it took time to build up a bank of itinerant teachers, and due to their itinerant nature, they could not provide long-term stable support in a specific school.

Connect to inclusive referral services

Lastly, creating an inclusive school environment – supporting teachers to support each child – involves inclusive referral services. For safeguarding, we mapped reporting and response services with their capacity to support children with disabilities and established clear safeguarding reporting processes with our partners. We also mapped relevant referral pathways to specialist support services, as locally as possible, including speech and language therapy, and health care providers. We ensured teachers were orientated on safeguarding and specialist support services.

The mapping activity identified many services which were limited in scope and capacity, and lacked the skills or equipment to appropriately support children with disabilities. Other services presented barriers of distance and associated cost for the families of children with disabilities to attend. Nonetheless, mapping and connecting with services through an inclusive lens gave teachers options for wraparound support. This meant they were not working in isolation to support the inclusion of every child with a disability in their classroom.

Key learning: Support teachers by investing in learning support assistants, itinerant teachers, and school-based inclusion teams. Strengthening social protection systems to support and protect children, including children with disabilities, is an integral part of inclusive education.

Conclusion

With the right support, every child can learn. Children with disabilities need teachers who are properly equipped to include them in learning, so they can enjoy the benefits of going to school and fully experience their right to an education. The Inclusive Futures programme has shown that equipping teachers with the skills, knowledge and attitudes in inclusion needs to go far beyond a short in-service training. A combination of inclusion mentors, responsive on-the-job support from peers and specialists, strong partnerships with OPDs and education authorities, and inclusive safeguarding and referral systems, are essential factors.

We've seen the difference the right support can make. When teachers are offered continual professional development and support, it changes the education experience for every child. The result is a learning environment that provides equal opportunities to learn, thrive, and be part of a community.

References

1. UNICEF, **Inclusive Education.** Accessed 22 January 2025.
2. Article 28 of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** (1989) recognises the right of all children to receive an education, stating that primary education should be compulsory and free to all, and that secondary education should be made available and accessible to every child. Article 24 of the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** (2016) calls for children with disabilities to have access to 'an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. This includes the provision of reasonable accommodations to children's needs along with adequate support to maximize economic and social development.'
3. Lena Morgon Banks and Sarah Polack. **The Economic Costs of Exclusion and Gains of Inclusion of People with Disabilities: Evidence from low- and middle-income countries.** (2014). See also, Harry Patrinos, World Bank Blogs. **Disability and Education: From Charity to Investment.** (2015).
4. Most notably Article 28 of the UNCRC and Article 24 of the UNCRPD. For analysis see **The right to education: Introducing articles 28 and 29.** Accessed 2 January 2025. See also, UNICEF. **Inclusive Education: Understanding Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.** (2017).
5. UNESCO. **Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020-21. Inclusion and education: All means all.** (2020).
6. Bolajoko O. Olusanya et al. **Early childhood development strategy for the world's children with disabilities.** (2024).
7. United Nations Children's Fund. **Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities.** (2022); Light for the World, Education International, Action Aid. **The bedrock of inclusion: why investing in the education workforce is critical to the delivery of SDG4: Lessons from five African countries.** (2020).
8. See UNICEF. **Inclusive Education.** Accessed 2 September 2024; Light for the World, Education International, Action Aid. **The bedrock of inclusion: why investing in the education workforce is critical to the delivery of SDG4: Lessons from five African countries.** (2020); UNESCO. **Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020-21. Inclusion and education: All means all.** (2020); World Bank Group. **Every learner matters: Unpacking the learning crisis for children with disabilities.** (2019); UNICEF. **UNICEF Fact Sheet: Children with Disabilities.** (2022).
9. For more information see British Council. **Train the Trainers & Cascade Models. A practical guide and toolkit.** (2018).
10. See for example, Inclusive Futures. **Our work on inclusive early childhood development and education in Kenya.** (March 2022).
11. UNESCO. **Global Education Monitoring Report: Leadership in education.** (2024).
12. See for example, Ministry of Education, Republic of Kenya. **Mentorship Policy for Early Learning and Basic Education.** (2019). Compared to Rojina Khandaker. **Professional Training: Crucial Need to Enhance the Efficacy of Preschool Teachers in the Context of Bangladesh.** (2021).

13. Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) were used to connect the teacher, the caregiver and the child on specific learning outcomes. For more information see pp152-158: Sightsavers and partners. **Inclusive education for children with disabilities Teacher training pack.** (May 2018).

14. For more about these teams see, Inclusive Futures. **Guidelines for establishment of school-based inclusion teams.** (2021).

15. For more about how we engage OPDs see, Inclusive Futures. **A guide to building successful partnerships between INGOs and disability organisations.** (2023).

16. In Nepal we conducted research on OPD members' views on inclusive education, as a baseline assessment for training we provided to OPDs during the project. **Perspectives on Inclusive Education of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, Nepal.** (May 2024).

17. Inclusive Futures. **Guidelines for establishment of school-based inclusion teams.** (2021).

18. For more information see Inclusive Futures. **Preparing schools to welcome children with disabilities.** (October 2024).

19. For example see, Humanity and Inclusion. **An itinerant teacher for Milan!.** Accessed 27 November 2024.

Copyrights