

Blog: Evidence on disability and education: accessing, using and communicating research

This blog was written by Nidhi Singal, Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Illustrations are by Julia Hayes, an experienced International Education consultant and psychologist who learned to graphic through consulting with disabled children, before developing her skills to illustrate conferences, service user events and reports. This blog was originally published on the [Impact Initiative website](#) on 22 January 2018.

The SDGs have increased the focus on including people with disabilities in development reforms. However, as [the World Disability Report](#) (2011) and [sequential editions of UNESCO's Global \(Education\) Monitoring Reports](#) highlight, one of the biggest challenges for decision-makers aiming to improve access and learning for children with disabilities is the lack of reliable data and evidence to shape effective policies and programmes.

In order to understand how individuals working in international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and other policy organisations engage with evidence on disability and education we identified and scoped the work of 19 key organisations working in this area (9 policy organisations, 10 INGOs) before undertaking interviews with selected stakeholders. We specifically focused on how individuals in these organisations:

1. access evidence
2. what they see as the important gaps in the current evidence base
3. what they perceive is the best way of presenting evidence to make it accessible to a wide group of stakeholders.

The main message highlighted in the discussions was that debates in the field of disability and education, to date, have largely been driven by a rights- and not evidence-based agenda. There has also been a tendency to use statistics uncritically. Individuals working these organisations noted that there is now a growing emphasis on the need for rigorous evidence in the field, with a particular focus on 'what works' to improve access and learning for children with disabilities. What is needed is reliable, succinct and accessible evidence which is available in a range of languages.

This blog reviews key messages from these interviews:

An increasing demand for evidence

Interviewees stressed that in recent years, there has been increasing demand for evidence to justify work being undertaken on disability and education.

“When I first started most of what we did was based on experience...over the past 3-4 years it's very difficult to get something approved...unless you have really solid evidence.”

Another interviewee noted this shift, describing how some senior managers check the content of reports through googling the counter-evidence, before approving them. This emphasis on ‘evidence’ is a notable shift in the field of disability which has, until very recently, been driven primarily by a rights-based argument.

In looking for research evidence, people tended to rely on internet searches (Google was mentioned often) and on global reports such as those published by the World Bank and UNESCO. A few mentioned that when they were looking for country specific information, they tended to rely on journal articles.

People face barriers in accessing evidence



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Most of the individuals we spoke to acted as knowledge brokers within their organisation, hence they were responsible for providing information to different audiences, including Ministry officials, INGO Country directors and project staff working on the ground.

The key barrier identified in accessing evidence was in relation to there being ‘too much’. This might sound contradictory given that all interviewees also noted the lack of robust evidence in the field. However, ‘too much’ makes sense when one notes that information was being primarily sought through Google.

“There’s so many places now where people can access research resources, people don’t know where to look...we tried to have internal websites...(but if) people are looking for something very specific...they can (prefer to) Google it”.

Two interviewees noted the use of journal articles as these are peer reviewed and hence, quality is assured. However, they mentioned that these were rarely available as open access, making it difficult and expensive.

“It has to be (free access) – there are some articles I find but, click, we aren’t members...we couldn’t possibly pay for all of the different access.”

One of the interviewees mentioned it is useful to attend conferences like the UKFIET education and development conference, a bi-annual event held in Oxford, which brings together academics and NGOs working in the field, however these are very expensive.

There is a lack of robust evidence on ‘what works’



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The lack of robust evidence at a time when disability is a focus in international meetings was strongly highlighted.

“People ARE looking for information, there is a clear gap, and people are trying to find answers and solutions, which aren’t necessarily there”.

“We are trying to do a lot with the little pool of evidence that we have”.

“We just don’t have enough solid, robust evidence to start having those arguments with Government.”

Arguing that this robust evidence should focus upon ‘what works’ in education for children with disabilities, the following specific themes emerged:

- Need to upscale successful local programmes so that they work at national system level.
- Disaggregated data on disability prevalence which highlights how disability intersects with other forms of disadvantage and over an individual’s life course, and also the need for longitudinal data.
- The cost effectiveness of investing in early years.
- The effectiveness of different models of supporting teachers to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities.

Communicating research evidence effectively



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“I spend my life repackaging information for different audiences”

Interviewees were eager to point out that communicating with diverse audiences requires diverse formats and content. However some key points need to be kept in mind when trying to get messages across.

- **Keep it succinct.** Summaries or fact sheets which are not more than 2-3 pages and give links to key articles and other sources of information, meaning the reader is able to follow up things in more detail, if they choose. Responding to this need, we have produced a summary of research on disability and education funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UK Department for International Development (DFID) in a new series on [Research for Policy and Practice](#).
- **Make existing evidence accessible.** Publish briefs and summaries in different languages such as, French, Spanish and Sign Language, more so when communicating with diverse disability groups; provide open access to key journal articles; set up an online hub for sharing important resources on education and disability.
- **Organise prominent knowledge sharing events at regional levels** to draw on different voices. There is a need to have more informal spaces for discussions between those generating evidence and those using it (e.g. seminars, round table discussions).
- **Harness the potential of technology** to share good practices in the field. Participants found webinars to be a very useful format, particularly when they are recorded and hosted on-line so people can access them at a later date, if needed.

Concluding reflections

Given the growing focus on disability and education, the demand for rigorous evidence to inform both policy and programme development is notable, with a particular focus on the ‘how’ to improve access and learning for children with disabilities. Hence, there is a heightened responsibility to conduct rigorous research and communicate it effectively, to make positive change feasible.

Further reading

- [ESRC-DFID research for policy and practice: disability and education](#): highlights evidence from ESRC-DFID funded research on what governments must consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination or exclusion.
- [Reducing school dropout rates in Malawi and Lesotho](#): explores pioneering techniques used by researchers from University College London's Institute of Education and their Southern African partners to help ensure that disadvantaged children, particularly those affected by HIV/ AIDS, stay in school.
- [The Impact Lab](#): drawing on the experiences of ESRC-DFID funded researchers, the Impact Initiative offers a range of practical resources for knowledge practitioners, researchers and research funders. The lab includes: [impact stories and learning guides](#); and an [edited collection of articles on evidence for development](#).