

Children with disabilities left out of universal primary education

Resentful attitudes, lack of essential scholastic materials, inadequate curriculum and absence of trained teachers have all conspired to frustrate access to education for children with disabilities

Since the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, eight million children have been able to access primary education. Out of all these, however, a little over 200,000 are children with disabilities. In a system that preaches education for all by 2015, there has been little focus on children with disabilities. In the first of our four-part series, Stephen Ssenkaaba investigates the factors that are hindering access to education for children with disabilities and the implications this has for Uganda's attainment of universal primary education as stipulated by Millennium Development Goal 2

FIRST, I notice her beautiful almond shaped eyes. Then her frantic classroom antics. Beauty (for that is her real name) Kiwuule has something about her that keeps me glued. One moment she looks up at Samuel Katooke, the teacher standing right in front of the class, delivering a science lesson. Next, she has her attention fixed on Lydia Namakiika, the interpreter. When Katooke asks: "Why do farmers keep cattle?" Kiwuule looks at Namakiika, waiting for an interpretation. When it is done, she raises her hand and, twists her fingers and taps each of her shoulders with her hands. Katooke looks puzzled until Namakiika speaks up to explain what the little girl has just said.

Kiwuule is one of eight pupils with hearing impairment in the P6 class of 43 children at Buckley High Primary School in Iganga district. Together with her seven colleagues, she is trying to fit into an inclusive education environment.

According to a report of the *State of the World's Children 2013: Children with Disabilities* report, inclusive education entails providing meaningful learning opportunities to all students within the regular school system. "Ideally, it allows children with and without disabilities to attend the same age-appropriate classes at the local school, with additional, individually tailored support as needed."

Dr. Stackus Okwaput, the acting head of the community and disability studies department at Kyambogo University, says effective inclusion revolves around "access, participation and achievement of pupils in the school environment."

Since the adoption of Universal Primary Education, the Government has encouraged inclusive education in primary



Pupils of Bishop West Primary School in Mukono in a special needs class. Primary schools should have specially trained teachers to attend to children with disabilities, but this is seldom the case. Photo by Henry Nsubuga



At St. Francis School for the Blind Madera in Soroti district, they have secured cheaper slates and stylus pens for pupils to use in place of Perkins Brailers. Photo by Godfrey Ojore



schools. Today, eight million children are in school as a result of the inclusive education campaign, but children with disabilities are yet to fully benefit from the campaign.

WORRYING TRENDS

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 98% of children living with disabilities in low and middle-income countries are not enrolled in school. The Uganda Society for Disabled Children (USDC) estimates that one third of all children out of school in Uganda are children with disabilities. Despite the Government's emphasis on inclusion of all children, enrolment for children with disabilities in schools remains low.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that on average, only 201,190 pupils with disabilities were in primary school during 2009-2011.

UNICEF says children with disabilities constitute the largest minority group that fail to complete primary school "even though about 60% of all children with

disabilities could attend school with no special adaptations and 85% could benefit from education with minor adaptations." This means that with the right systems in place, the majority of children with disabilities should be able to fit and study in ordinary schools.

A *New Vision* investigation into education for children with disabilities in primary schools reveals that schools are yet to adapt to the needs of children with disabilities. Resentful attitudes, lack of essential scholastic materials, inadequate curriculum and absence of trained teachers have all conspired to frustrate access to education for children with disabilities.

COPING IN A DEFICIENT SYSTEM

At Buckley High Primary School, Kiwuule and her seven colleagues struggle to fit into a learning environment that is too fast for them. During lessons, they occupy the last four hindmost desks on the immediate left row of the classroom.

Sometimes, the pupils go without an interpreter, especially when their interpreters are busy elsewhere. "This makes it hard for us to follow what is being taught," Kiwuule says.

"There are only six teachers at the school with sign language skills, hardly enough to support all pupils with hearing impairments," Grace Tibukuza, the head of special needs in the school, says.

Away from class, Kiwuule and her colleagues try to consult their hearing classmates, but they never achieve much because of what Vivian Namukose, Kiwuule's classmate, calls "communication problems".

"They don't understand what we say, we also don't understand their language," Namukose says.

The cost of a special-needs unit

Schools are finding it hard to support pupils with disabilities because of the high costs involved in hiring and maintaining specialist teachers and setting up physical structures.

According to Nayinda Ssentumbwe, a supplier of disability scholastic materials, it costs about sh50m to establish and run a fairly well-equipped special-needs unit in a school. One Perkins Braille (the essential writing tool for the blind) costs sh2.5m; a single carton of braille paper (lasts only a few weeks) goes for sh200,000, while a standard local sign language dictionary costs sh80,000.

"Trained teachers are equally expensive to hire and maintain," he says.

Schools with special-needs units, receive a subvention of only sh3m a term. This covers light meals,

first aid and scholastic materials for children with disabilities and other special needs. This, according to many headteachers, is insufficient.

At Nakatunya Primary School in Soroti district, where 45 of the 1,020 total pupils have disabilities, the special needs unit was closed. "There was nothing in that room," John Okello, the teacher in charge of special needs, says. The room has since turned into a teachers' house.

Due to what Okello calls "administrative challenges", the school no longer receives a special-needs subvention from the Government. This has affected services for learners with disabilities and special needs. The school also lacks specialised toilets and sufficient number of ramps to ease access to different areas of the school compound.



A Primary Six teacher at Bishop West Primary School in Mukono Municipality during a maths lesson. In this school, children with disabilities study with the rest, which poses serious challenges for both the teachers and pupils. Photo by Henry Nsubuga

The school has got a special needs unit, which is supposed to provide hearing aids, charts, sign language manuals and other support aids.

"But it does not have any of these materials," Tibukuza says. With more than half of the teaching staff unable to read and interpret sign language; with many lacking the skills and the patience to handle slow learners and pupils with mental challenges, Tibukuza feels that the curriculum does not help pupils like Kiwuule and others with learning disabilities.

Teachers here wish the school had a vocational unit. Talented pupils like Kiwuule (she is a gifted dancer) would benefit more. "But we do not have the facilities to start a vocational unit," Tibukuza explains.

At Bishop West Primary School in Mukono, teachers use modest means to integrate children with physical and learning disabilities in a mainstream environment.

According to Veronica Matinyi, the head of the special-needs department in the school, 73 of 650 pupils in this school have disabilities. Both teachers and pupils face serious challenges.

In Primary Two, nine-year-old Henry Nanjwenge experiences mood swings. He is autistic. His teachers find him very destructive.

"He keeps moving out of class, sulks a lot and keeps poking his classmates," Vennie Nassolo, the P5 teacher, says.

I found Nanjwenge marooned in a corner all by himself, isolated from the rest of his classmates as the midday class progressed.

"We have decided to put him in that corner so that he does not disturb the rest," Nassolo explained.

Because of what Nassolo calls a "difficult" personality, Nanjwenge is unable to learn much. This has affected his performance. He is always in the last position," Matinyi said.

Like Nanjwenge, there are a number of pupils here who cannot cope with the environment. There is need for improved access to toilets and other buildings at the school. "But where do we get the money

for that," Matinyi asks.

NEGLECTED BY PARENTS

Some parents neglect their children with disabilities, transferring the responsibility of caring for them to schools.

Esther Nandase, the headteacher of Buckley High Primary School, says: "Some parents 'dump' their children at school and forget them there, never to visit. Most do not pay school fees for them. A few pay only half of the fees and never complete the balance. Some even forget to collect them from school when the term ends."

This has placed a huge financial burden on schools. The already cash-strapped schools sometimes divert funds from some programmes to cater for the needs of children with disabilities, while a few lucky ones are helped to get sponsors through non-government organisations.

Parental neglect also traumatises

children with disabilities and affects their esteem and academic performance.

CONSEQUENCES

All schools visited reported continued absenteeism, poor academic performance and growing dropout rates of children with disabilities.

At Bishop West Primary School, an average of six pupils with disabilities drop out every year. Madera School for the Blind, on average, loses three pupils every year.

Out of 45 pupils with disabilities in Nakatunya Primary School, five pupils have left school this year alone. Once these children leave school, many are unable to return. According to UNICEF, out of about 201,190 children with disabilities enrolled in primary school between 2009-2011, only 11,829 went on to secondary school.

This points to the high dropout rates. As long as many of them keep leaving, universal primary education will remain a distant dream.



Blind students using Perkins Brailers to study. However, this technology is quite expensive and most schools cannot afford it. Photo by Godfrey Ojore

Sh50m

According to Nayinda Ssentumbwe, a supplier of scholastic materials for children with disabilities, it costs about sh50m to establish and run a fairly well-equipped special-needs unit in a school. One Perkins Braille (the essential writing tool for the blind) costs sh2.5m; a single carton of braille paper (lasts only a few weeks) goes for sh200,000, while a standard local sign language dictionary costs sh80,000.

Special school struggles

At the government-owned Salaama School for the Blind in Wakiso district, pupils struggle to access basic facilities. There are 80 pupils in the school and only 15 Perkins Brailers. Out of these, only seven are functional, according to Francis Kinubi, the headteacher.

The school requires sh200m to purchase enough machines to serve the pupils. They also require braille textbooks and paper to use on a daily basis, which, going by the sh50,000 unit cost per ream of paper, requires over sh10m every term.

To make up for the shortfall, the school has secured cheaper slates and stylus pens for pupils to use instead of the Perkins Brailers. But these, as 12-year-old Sandra Kisembo in P6 says, "slow us down." Lessons that should last 40 minutes here go on for more than an hour as pupils struggle with improvised materials. "In the end, we cannot finish the syllabus in time," says Kinubi.

In place of braille paper, the school now buys manila paper from Nasser Road. "

However, the notes written here fade fast and cannot be read," says Kinubi. There are only two teachers with special needs training out of the eight teaching staff. The rest simply gamble their way around.

Kinubi says the school has not received any scholastic materials from the Government since 2010, apart from sh500,000 in UPE capitation grants and a sh3m special needs subvention. And yet, 25 out of its 80 pupils come from poor families and, therefore, depend on the school for fees and scholastic materials.

"We now depend largely on donations from Good Samaritans and on the school farm for feeding," Kinubi says.

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Double tragedy: Children with disabilities shunned by both teachers and society

Passion ruled her job. So every morning, Rose Ninina walked to work just to ensure that her class could receive her much needed attention. For eight hours she toiled in a class of children with different disabilities; persuading them, paying attention to each of them and even walking around the compound to collect discarded tins to use in place of appropriate play materials. Then one day, she threw in the towel. "I have a family to feed," she told me. With only sh300,000 for salary, she found it difficult to carry on with a job that could hardly support her. "I had to put my love for teaching children with disabilities into clear perspective," she says. More trained teachers are walking away from schools that have children with disabilities. Poor pay, lack of scholastic materials and inadequate support networks are partly to blame. But also, the adoption of a broader teacher-training curriculum in special needs at Kyambogo University and other institutions of higher learning has implications for the effective delivery of skills to pupils in schools, writes Stephen Ssenkaaba in this second part of our series



resentful attitudes towards these children. Some teachers interviewed confessed to finding it too "demanding" and "difficult" to teach in a class that includes pupils with disabilities.

"They are slow learners. It requires a lot of patience and time to teach them, yet we are too busy," one teacher said.

Due the challenges involved in teaching children with special needs, we found that some teachers had given up teaching and found 'better' jobs. Some headteachers said that some teachers turn down appointments to schools for children with disabilities. The reasons, it appears, revolve around the poor working conditions in some of these schools.

Poor pay for teachers

Poor remuneration and lack of scholastic facilities have driven away trained teachers from schools for children with disabilities. Teachers like Rose Ninina, who despite their love for children with disabilities, left her job because of demotivating circumstances.

"For three years after my graduation from Kyambogo University, I put in nearly eight hours of work, teaching children with various forms of disabilities. I was only one of three trained teachers in my school. There was too much work for us," she narrates.

She adds that because of the frustration of working without the required teaching facilities, "I used to go around looking for used tins and discarded materials to make up for the absence of play materials for my class. Soon, those around me started calling me "the mad woman".

TESTIMONY

Dorothy Bukenya, a teacher, graduated from Kyambogo University with skills in sign language interpretation. She worked for two years as head of the special needs unit in an inclusive primary school in Kamuli district. One day, her employers terminated her services, saying they could not afford to pay her. Her monthly salary at the time was sh280,000

Some teachers have been discouraged by the disability-unfriendly environment in some schools.

May Caroline Ademere



Pupils of Nakatunya Primary School in Soroti district attending a lesson. The school has 29 special needs education teachers. Photo by Godfrey Ojore

Basic skills

used to teach in an inclusive primary school in Kumi district until she lost her job under questionable circumstances.

"I applied for study leave to join Kyambogo University for a degree course in special needs and never heard from the headteacher again. As I waited for confirmation of my leave, I started my course in Kyambogo. On completing my course two years later, I returned to find that my job had been given to another person," she says.

Ademere was one of few teachers that had attained skills in special needs and disabilities. Despite her willingness to continue teaching, she was turned away. She is now a special needs volunteer in Gayaza in Wakiso district.

Dorothy Bukenya, a teacher, graduated from Kyambogo University with skills in sign language interpretation. She worked for two years as head of the special needs unit in an inclusive primary school in Kamuli district. One day, her employers terminated her services.

"They said they could not afford to pay me," she explains. Her monthly salary was sh280,000. Today, Nabukenya is a freelance sign language interpreter at Makerere University.

Nevertheless, Dr. Okwaput adds that the course

gives teachers sufficient working knowledge of the disability skills which can be improved on the job when the teachers interface with affected students.

To produce more trained teachers, the university also runs a long distance training programme in six primary teacher colleges (PTCs). The one-year course involves two-week face-to-face sessions every semester holiday for teachers in the six PTCs and offers rudimentary skills in special needs education.

NEEDED

Emphasis on proper training, improvement in the conditions of teachers and the right attitude will help in improving matters

Schools mostly depend on unskilled teachers, many of whom not only lack the skills to support learners with disabilities, but also perpetuate negative and resentful attitudes towards these children

Loopholes

Kyambogo University, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Sports, also implements a pre-service teacher training course on special needs in several primary teachers colleges (PTCs) across the country. However, the implementation of this course has been found lacking.

A 2013 report by Dr. Okwaput on special needs pre-service teacher training in PTCs indicates that the course does not prepare teachers well enough to teach in an inclusive environment.

The report highlights limited time allocated to training, use of training methods that are not appropriate in inclusive classrooms, insufficient numbers of teacher trainers in institutions and lack of instructional materials as major obstacles to quality teacher training in special needs.

"Most of the time, the trainees do not get a

chance to experience teaching in an inclusive school environment," the report says: "The training also puts more emphasis on traditional subjects in teacher education as opposed to special needs skills. Because of the lecture teaching method used during training, trainees do not get to experience an interactive teaching environment needed in an inclusive environment. Trainee classes are also very congested, with over 500 trainees per one trainer in every class."

Most Kyambogo University trained teachers interviewed felt they were confident enough to teach students with disabilities even though they felt they required more practical skills. All these issues have serious implications for quality training and teaching offered to pupils out there. Emphasis on proper training, improvement in the conditions of teachers and the right attitudes will help improve matters.

Few teachers

The above issues are not helped by the small number of trained teachers graduating from higher education institutions.


According to the DFID report on inclusive education in Uganda, "only 716 in-service teachers have been trained through the full-time bachelors and diploma courses at Kyambogo University since 1990." Until recently, the only institution with the capacity to train teachers in special needs and disabilities.

The report further indicates that 1,451 were enrolled on the distance courses between 2000 and 2003. This is only a fraction of the nearly 130,000 teachers employed in primary schools in the country. It means that the majority of schools do not have qualified teachers in the field of special needs and disabilities.

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Inclusive education: The missing link

Slow action, limited funding; the long bumpy journey for children with disabilities may get better

The Government continues to preach inclusive education for all children of school-going age regardless of their ability or disability. Why then are many children with disabilities out of school? In this fourth and last part of our series, Stephen Senkaaba presents the contradictions that have kept many children with disabilities outside of an inclusive system of education. He also shares examples of countries where inclusion has worked and practical solutions to the problems that beset Uganda.

FOR a long time in Uganda, people with disabilities were regarded as sick or disadvantaged. There was very little effort to recognise and enable them enjoy their rights. Often, parents never sent children with disabilities to school.

The first school for children with disabilities was established at the request of the colonial, Governor Sir. Andrew Cohen. St. Francis School for the Blind Madera in Soroti district was founded in 1955 by the Little Sisters of St. Francis congregation.

Later, special schools like Kampala School for the Physically Handicapped (1969), Ngora School for the Deaf, Buckley High Primary School in Iganga, Kireka Home for Special Needs and a few others, were set up.

According to research by Jacqui Mattingly and Martin Babu Mwesiwa, the Government support for special needs and disability education evolved slowly, with religious and non-governmental organisations taking the mantle of supporting and financing most disability and special-needs initiatives.

It was in 1983 that the education ministry, established a department of special education. Four years later, the Kajubi Commission recommended more Government support for special needs education.

Mattingly and Mwesiwa also note that, "Initially, the Ugandan Government had no policy on training teachers in special needs until 1992, when it established a policy on 'Education for National Integration and Development'.

"Here, the Government pledged to support special needs education by providing funding and teacher training. A 1991 Act of Parliament mandated the Uganda National Institute of Special Education, UNISE, (now Faculty of Special Needs and Rehabilitation, Kyambogo University) to train special needs education teachers," they write.

The first major government programme on disability and special needs was established in 1992, when the Government, in collaboration with the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), implemented the Educational Assessment and Resource Services (EARS) programme.

The programme led to the education



Girls getting tailoring skills from Masindi centre for the handicapped
Photos by Geoffrey Mutegeki Araali



A physically challenged pupil learning to walk



ministry establishing a department of special needs education/guidance and counselling and a policy framework for educationally disadvantaged children. It also provided resources for office accommodation at the districts, small homes at schools, resource rooms, school facility grants and procurement in 45 districts. The programme wound up in 2003.

SHIFT TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

More proactive approaches to special needs and education of children with disabilities were adopted as Uganda ratified various international conventions on child rights which, among other things, emphasised inclusion of children with disabilities in education and other services.

As a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), the country committed to observe and protect the rights of all individuals.

The 1995 Constitution through

articles, 21, 32 and 34, also provided for recognition of people with disabilities and the right to education. The Disability Act of 2006 made an even stronger case for inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system.

The Government also ratified key education instruments such as the World Declaration on Education For All (EFA) framework to meet basic learning needs for children (Jomtien, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). All these underscored equal and fair access to education for all children.

LIMITED FUNDING

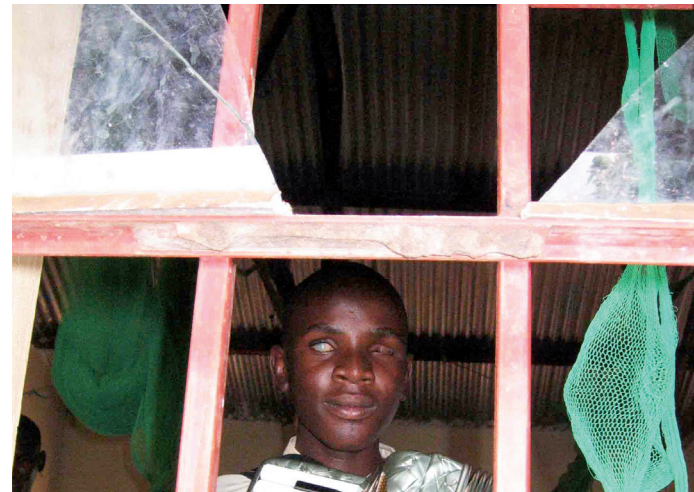
Where inadequate scholastic materials and school facilities are concerned, fingers are pointing to the dwindling government funding for special needs education programmes.

For instance, out of the sh1.76 trillion education sector budget for the 2013/2014 financial year, sh2.16b (0.12%) was allocated to special needs education programmes; only a little more than the sh1.68b allocated in 2012/13 and sh1.89b for 2011/2012.

The next financial year's projections indicate that this funding will reduce even more to sh2.06b.

"With such limited funding, planning and allocating requisite resources to schools has been difficult," says Edson Ndirabakunzi, the executive director of the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUPIDU).

Teacher training also suffered a setback when the Government reduced the number of students it sponsors to study special needs courses at Kyambogo University from 30 some years back to



A pupil of St. Francis Primary School for the Blind in Soroti district standing near a window with a broken glass. Some of the infrastructure in schools for children with special needs is wanting

only seven as of today.

"Considering the high cost of training in this field, many interested teachers cannot afford to enroll as private students. As such, fewer and fewer teachers are being trained to go out and teach in schools," Asher Bayo, the acting dean of the faculty of special needs and rehabilitation at Kyambogo University explains.

Out of the faculty's sh1.6b budget, the Government has offered only sh700m this financial year to meet the huge costs for training and research.

With three quarters of this budget spent on lecturers' wage bill, very little remains to meet the costs of other key training components for a faculty that

has only 10 functional braille machines, two television sets and one video camera. Since the closure of the EARS programme 10 years ago, the structures and facilities put in place under the programme are no longer functional.

The vehicles and buildings were turned to other purposes. The wanting support for special needs and disability education programmes has been attributed to slow government action.

"We have been engaging with key education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, district education officers and teachers to address these problems. We still wait for action," NUDIPU's Ndirabakunzi says.

Sh2m to sh3m

The amount of money the Government provides per term to teach a government-aided school that has children with special needs

What has the Government done?

The Government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, says it is doing all that is possible, despite not having enough funds to provide all that is needed.

"We definitely understand that this is not enough. Our aim is to provide additional support that can keep children with disabilities and other special needs going," Francis Akope, the principal education officer for inclusive education at the education ministry, says.

He explains that even though facilities are not enough, there is something on the ground to keep the system going and where it is not sufficient, the ministry cannot do much to change things because the funds are not enough.

"We hope that most children with special needs can be catered for under the inclusive system, but where this is not possible, we still maintain special needs schools and units in some schools," Akope says.

Mindful of the needs of children with special needs in schools, the Government provides a small subvention of sh2m to sh3m every term to each government-aided school that is known to have children with special needs.

This money caters for light meals, first aid and scholastic materials for learners.

The Government has also drafted a policy on special needs and inclusive education which, on implementation, will ensure that more funding and better facilities are provided to boost special needs education. Unfortunately, the Cabinet approval of this policy has been delayed due to lack of funds.

Schools have also complained that the sh3m subvention is just a pittance and, like the UPE capitation grant, sometimes does not come on time.

Lessons from other countries

RWANDA

According to the DFID 2011 report on inclusive education assessment in Uganda, through its child-friendly schools initiative, Rwanda has established an improved school environment with better teaching methods and psychological support for all learners, particularly girls and other vulnerable children such as those with disabilities.

Under this arrangement, high standards are set for teaching methods and curricula, sanitation facilities, and the provision of sports and co-curricular activities.

The programme also utilises peer-group clubs, mentoring, and community activism. Schools under this initiative were the first in the nation to mainstream children with disabilities, with 7500 being served as at 2009. Today, the child-friendly programme is in all schools and has also been adopted as the basic standard for all primary schools in Rwanda.

ZAMBIA

The Ministry of Education policy in Zambia recommends that children with special education needs remain in the regular school system. This followed a 1999 child-to-child twinning pilot project called the Mpika Inclusive Education Project. Under this project, children with disabilities were put together with their ordinary counterparts to explore issues around disability and exclusion. The exercise was co-ordinated by teachers who afterwards delivered school-based training sessions for other teachers

in their own schools to raise awareness of inclusion.

Today, thanks to the policy, children with disabilities are more accepted in regular classrooms and some have gone on to high schools. There has also been a change in attitudes in the community towards children with disabilities.

KENYA

In Oriang province, a holistic participatory approach encompassing teacher training, community involvement, child-to-child initiatives and improving the environment, has been in place since 2002.

Training focuses on the enhancement of skills that empower the teachers to stop viewing children as a group of learners, but as individuals with diverse learning needs.

Through training, the teachers have been encouraged to adopt a much more eclectic reflective approach in their teaching.

This is to ensure that the teachers are not only sensitive to the children in their classrooms, but are also able to share with colleagues and support parents.

Parents are encouraged to host meetings, workshops, share experiences and support each other to supplement teacher input, training and raise disability awareness among the community members.

Community-based rehabilitation is provided using community health workers to administer and train parents in basic physical therapy activities and primary healthcare initiatives such as epilepsy management.

Implications and way forward

Unless proactive measures are adopted to change the situation, many children with disabilities will miss out on life-changing education opportunities.

This implies not only violating their rights to education, but also failing to attain the education for all and MDG2 targets. It will also further entrench poverty among people with disabilities.

According to the State of the World's Children 2013 report, once children with disabilities miss education, "it means that many more children will be denied the lifelong benefits of education: a better job, social and economic security, and opportunities for full participation in society."

WAY FORWARD

"We need to plan for inclusive education so that it becomes entrenched. It is about mapping out the steps towards achieving inclusion within a specified time. Specific attention needs to

be paid to some of the issues that impede access to education for learners with disabilities such as curriculum and teacher competencies,"

Dolorence Were, the executive director of Uganda Society for Disabled Children, says.

FIGHT DISCRIMINATION

According to the State of the World's Children 2013 report, discrimination lies at the root of many challenges confronted by children with disabilities.

Apart from being implemented in law and policy, the principles of equal rights and non-discrimination should be reinforced by enhancing awareness of disability among the general public, starting with those who provide essential services such as education.

International agencies and their governments should provide officials and public servants with a deeper understanding of the rights, capacities and challenges of children with disabilities so that service providers and policymakers are able to prevail against prejudice.

IMPROVE FUNDING

Ndirabakunzi says funding to special needs education should be increased from 0.12% to 1% of the education sector budget. "We also call for recruitment of special needs education officers to ensure proper inspection in schools," he explains.

TEACHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM

"We need to make reforms in the teacher education curriculum to enhance aspects of special needs and disability studies," says Dr. Stackus Okwaput, the acting head, community and disability studies department at Kyambogo University.

He explains that, for instance, instead of teaching the course on special needs education as a subsection under the professional education studies programme, this course should be taught and examined separately. That way, much more importance and support will be accorded to it.

STREAMLINE ASSESSMENT

A system should be developed for the identification, assessment and placement of children requiring special needs education.

"This should be seen in terms of the support the children

require in order for them to participate in school and not in medical or other negative terms relating to their condition," states the Department for International Development report.

CONCLUSION

Despite all the commendable efforts to make education accessible to all children, those with disabilities continue to face challenges. Poor planning and lack of funds are at the heart of this ongoing situation.

It will take more than just government action or non-governmental organisation involvement to solve this problem, which has now made our hopes for education for all even more distant.

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A visually impaired child