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Concept note

MAKING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION INCLUSIVE FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

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Section of Health and Education

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Background

Around 16% of the world's population – 1.3 billion people – have a disability.¹ According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”² Barriers can be physical, communicational, structural, financial, or organizational, with the biggest barriers being attitudinal and societal. Despite progress over recent years in realizing the rights of persons with disabilities, resulting in improved laws, policies and practices related to inclusive education, many barriers remain, hindering the participation of persons with disabilities in society and their access to quality education.³

The right to education is a basic human right and a powerful tool that can lift excluded children and adults out of disadvantaged circumstances to create better opportunities for themselves. Young persons with disabilities have the same rights as any person to the highest attainable standard of education. This is laid out by different human rights instruments, and especially the CRPD, which includes the right to awareness raising on disability inclusion at all levels of education (Art. 2b), education to protect persons with disabilities from all forms of violence (Art. 16.1), as well as access to inclusive, free and quality primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others (Art. 24.2.b). Furthermore, Art. 23.1.b states the right of persons with disabilities to access age-appropriate information, reproductive and family planning education.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.⁴ CSE is critical for all young people provided that it is age and developmentally appropriate.⁵

However, young people with disabilities face a variety of challenges and barriers in accessing CSE. At one extreme (linked to general sociocultural taboos around young people's sexuality), it is often believed or assumed that young persons with disabilities are asexual or not interested or involved in romantic relationships, not acknowledging that they experience sexual feelings, needs and desires like any other young person. At the other extreme, girls with intellectual disabilities are often treated as hypersexualized and/or as lacking agency and rights, and are subjected to different forms of violence, especially sexual violence.⁶ The invisibility and denial of the sexuality of young persons with disabilities prevents them from accessing not only comprehensive sexuality education in and out of school, but also sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services and support at home and outside. The limited availability of CSE and other relevant educational materials in formats accessible to learners with disabilities, and the scarcity of teachers trained in disability-inclusive CSE, pose further challenges. The resulting lack of access to both information and services leads many adolescents and young people with disabilities to exercise their sexuality in a precarious and hidden manner, jeopardizing their physical and mental health.⁷

¹ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600>

² <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

³ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600>

⁴ <https://csetoolkit.unesco.org/toolkit/getting-started/what-comprehensive-sexuality-education>

⁵ <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/resources/fact-sheets/sexual-health-education-for-young-people-with-disabilities/>

⁶ Michielsen, K. & Brockschmidt, L. (2021) 'Barriers to sexuality education for children and young people with disabilities in the WHO European region: a scoping review', *Sex Education*, 21:6, 674-692. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681811.2020.1851181>

⁷ <https://lac.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-Info-Discapacidad%20ING%20110319%20%281%29.pdf>

Rationale

The **United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS)**,⁸ adopted by the Secretary General in 2019, provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work we do in the UN. It enables the UN system to support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other international human rights instruments, as well as the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Agenda for Humanity and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The Strategy asserts that “the United Nations system will systematically embed the rights of persons with disabilities into its work, both externally, through programming, and internally, and will build trust and confidence among persons with disabilities to ensure that they are valued and their dignity and rights are respected and that, in the workplace, they find an enabling environment in which to fully and effectively participate on an equal basis with others.”

UNESCO has engaged in different activities related to disability inclusion, for example by publishing a technical brief on *Violence and bullying in educational settings: the experience of children and young people with disabilities*.⁹ It has also included dedicated chapters and graphics on learners with disabilities in various publications, including the most recent global status report *Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world*. UNESCO's Strategy on Education for Health and Well-being (2022) emphasizes the importance of making CSE inclusive of learners with disabilities and references below-mentioned studies conducted in the Asia Pacific and Eastern and Southern Africa regions on teachers' and learners' needs for disability-inclusive CSE.

UNESCO's Section on Gender and Inclusion focuses on creating more inclusive education systems and policies through technical support to Member States, including capacity building, partnerships at global level and resource bases for inclusion and the mapping of related activities at UNESCO; efforts that can be built on for this proposed CSE-specific piece of work by the Section on Health and Education (HAE). The two sections have already collaborated on disability inclusion, for example on the violence and bullying brief mentioned in the paragraph above.

In 2022, the Internal Oversight Service (IOS) of UNESCO published an evaluation of the Education Sector's overall work on inclusion in education,¹⁰ which noted that disability inclusion was still at an “incipient level”. It recommended that UNESCO should “increase the availability, use and dissemination of data on inclusion to learn what works for whom under which circumstances.”

In recent years, two of UNESCO's regional offices have led research to identify the challenges teachers and learners face in the delivery of and access to CSE with specific reference to disability. A needs assessment carried out in Asia Pacific region on teachers' experiences and professional learning and development needs for providing CSE to learners with disabilities¹¹ identified several gaps such as: disability-inclusive CSE training; scarcity of good-quality disability-inclusive CSE resources in the region; teachers' lack of awareness and teaching experience with CSE; teachers' lack of capacity to link disability and violence prevention so as to protect learners with disabilities; as well as some teachers' preconceptions that CSE is less important for learners with non-binary gender identities and non-physical impairment types. Overall, the assessment recommended the need from a global and regional level perspective a) to conduct more rigorous research to understand how to build teacher capacity to deliver disability-inclusive CSE and to support the potential scaling-up of existing programmes and b) to ensure that research on disability-inclusive CSE meaningfully involves persons with disabilities, including at the planning stage, as this would be useful to respond to the limited global and regional evidence available on what works in teacher preparation and inadequate support for delivering disability-inclusive CSE.

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>

⁹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378061>

¹⁰ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380760>

¹¹ UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2022: Disability-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education in Asia and the Pacific: an assessment of teacher needs (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383924.locale=en>)

Further to this needs assessment, research was also conducted to gain understanding of how to support teachers in the Asia Pacific region to deliver disability-inclusive CSE.¹² The research provided evidence on the gaps that exist with regards to teacher training and training resources. For example, whilst training teachers on disability-inclusive CSE overall is a need, it is also important to develop specific practical strategies for delivering CSE content to learners that is responsive to their type of disability. Furthermore, the research showed that there is need for more sensitization about the sexual and reproductive health rights and needs of learners with non-physical impairments, as well as those of learners with different gender identities. Teacher training and resources should therefore also address stigma and misconceptions about gender and disability in the context of CSE.

In the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region, a needs assessment in five countries¹³ recommended the development of a module on CSE and inclusion, with disability as one of the components, as part of the teacher training curriculum in teachers' colleges and universities. This could be, for example, a module on 'CSE and inclusive societies' which would enable an exploration of the intersectionality of other factors, including gender. Additionally, the findings led to a recommendation that teacher training institutions should ensure that their CSE curriculum focuses on the social and psychological part of CSE and not just the more 'scientific' topics such as anatomy and basic human development. With regards to tools and resources, the assessment found that there are relatively good teaching and learning resources already available in the region and therefore recommended that a mapping of resources from the study be used as starting point for the identification of resource materials for teachers and learners.

Recognizing that children with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, the ESA needs assessment also recommends the development of a 'toolbox' of approaches and resources, which should include some general guidance on different modes of delivery of information, as well both teacher and learning resources for children with different learning needs. In addition to this assessment, the ESA region implemented a project¹⁴ that collected testimonies from 56 young persons with disabilities to get a snapshot of their lived experiences. Testimonials highlighted the fact that due to lack of awareness of the issues they face, they are more prone to violence and bullying in school. This links to efforts being made through CSE implementation to address violence prevention for all with a specific focus on learners with disabilities. Raising awareness in the whole school environment of the needs of young persons with disabilities would ultimately contribute to ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment for all learners.

In Europe, the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) works towards the full realization of sexual rights of young persons with intellectual disabilities and mental health conditions. Under the EU co-funded project SMARTS ("Support Me About My Sexual Rights"), guidance has been developed on how to support persons with intellectual disabilities and young persons with mental health conditions to make their own decisions about their sexuality, using the Supported Decision Making (SDM) approach. In addition, EASPD has recently launched a project aimed at breaking stereotypes around sexuality education and young persons with intellectual disabilities (YPWIDs) based on the development of a game-based learning approach.¹⁵ Other actors, including the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, have also reiterated the right of learners with disabilities to CSE.¹⁶

In Latin America, several activities related to sexual and reproductive health and rights and CSE for learners with disabilities have been carried out. For example, UNFPA, together with the Latin American

¹² UNESCO Bangkok Office (2022), *Technical Brief: Understanding how to support teachers in the Asia-Pacific Region to deliver disability-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education* (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383925.locale=en>)

¹³ UNESCO Office in Harare (2021) Needs Assessment: Current state of Comprehensive Sexual Education for Young People with Disabilities in the East and Southern African region

¹⁴ UNESCO Office in Harare (2022) Stories from the classroom: how learners with disabilities can promote safe and inclusive education.

¹⁵ <https://www.easpd.eu/project-detail/giaff4id-games-for-improving-affectivity-in-youngsters-with-intellectual-disabilities/>

¹⁶ See, for example, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/comprehensive-sexuality-education-protects-children-and-helps-build-a-safer-inclusive-society>; and [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/719998/IPOL_STU\(2022\)719998_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/719998/IPOL_STU(2022)719998_EN.pdf)

Network of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families, have developed out-of-school training on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people and women with disabilities,¹⁷ and the Ministry of Education of Chile has published a study on the needs of young persons with intellectual impairments when it comes to CSE, along with a teachers' guide on this matter.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Interamerican Institute on Disability and Inclusive Development (iiDi), together with the Uruguayan National Administration on Public Education, UNFPA and UNICEF has developed materials for families to speak about sexuality with their children with disabilities,¹⁹ while the UNESCO office in Santiago is currently working on a podcast series, including the voices of young people with disabilities on sexuality education, just to name a few examples.

Proposal

Based on findings from the work done in the regions, UNESCO – in line with its Strategic Outcome 2: Good quality, gender transformative CSE including HIV, life skills, family and rights – is proposing a new area of work to develop and promote CSE that is more accessible and inclusive for learners with disabilities. The regional studies highlight that more awareness is needed at the global level on the scale of the issue, as well as to ensure that CSE implementation approaches include considerations to modify their design and delivery to make sexuality education meaningful to learners with disabilities in a wide range of different contexts. There is also a need to ensure that disability inclusiveness is integrated across UNESCO's work in support of CSE.

Objectives

The overall aim of this work is to contribute to ensuring that in the implementation of CSE globally whether in or out of school, no young person with disabilities is left behind.

The specific objectives of this work, and associated progress indicators, will include:

1. Better understand the needs of teachers and students in the context of the delivery of CSE in the education sector for learners with disabilities, particularly outside the Asia Pacific and East and Southern Africa regions, as well as the global landscape of actors, and the programmes and approaches used globally, with an emphasis on those that have been field-tested and evaluated. (Indicator: production of the global assessment and mapping)
2. Enhance dialogue between relevant stakeholders and UNESCO on the matter and facilitate the development and expansion of disability inclusive education in participating countries, targeting both disability inclusion actors and CSE actors to create synergies. (Indicator: number of countries/stakeholders engaged in the dialogue and number of countries equipped with the advocacy materials and good practice briefs)
3. Build awareness on disability rights, accessibility and inclusion and in-house capacity of key UNESCO staff in Headquarters and relevant regional and field offices to equip staff with adequate tools and resources to mainstream disability inclusion. (Indicator: number of people trained at the in-house training for UNESCO staff and equipped with the resources)
4. In the long run, support Member States to develop and deliver disability-inclusive CSE that is contextually appropriate and in line with ITGSE. (Indicator: number of countries undertaking steps towards more inclusive CSE, such as assessing national situation/needs, mapping actors, developing/adapting/adopting policies, guidelines, teacher training curricula, etc.)

¹⁷ <https://www.riadis.org/curso-regional-jovenes-con-discapacidad-2021/>

¹⁸ <https://especial.mineduc.cl/recursos-apoyo-al-aprendizaje/recursos-las-los-docentes/documentos-sexualidad-estudiantes-nee/>

¹⁹ https://uruguay.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/62_file1.pdf and https://www.anep.edu.uy/sites/default/files/images/Archivos/publicaciones-direcciones/DDHH/sexualidad/Es%20parte%20de%20la%20vida%20II_compressed.pdf

Scope of work

This piece of work will be carried out between November 2023 and August 2024. The objectives outlined above will be achieved through the development of a needs assessment, including the mapping of actors, programmes and resources, a series of accompanying original advocacy materials and in-house training on accessibility and inclusion.

To achieve the proposed aims, the following tasks are foreseen:

Phase I

1. **Needs assessment:** A desk review will be conducted to explore the latest published and unpublished data and information on CSE for learners with disabilities. This will build on the needs assessments from the AP and ESA regions, and previous work including the International Technical Guidance on out-of-school CSE for young people from left-behind populations,²⁰ to create a global overview of initiatives, curricula guidelines and actors for CSE for learners with disabilities. This includes the mapping of actors and organizations that have prior experience in delivering CSE to learners with disabilities and their programmes and/or resources available that can inform this suite of work. This will enable UNESCO to engage and build relations with key partners and set the ground for future work, both to mainstream disability inclusion and to carry out specific work on learners with disabilities.
2. **Think tank meeting:** An online meeting composed of experts focused on CSE for learners with disabilities (including those with the expertise of lived experience) will be held to garner evidence and best practices, including approaches, methodologies, effectiveness, efficiency, inclusiveness, and impact, building on the results of the needs assessment. This activity will also be an opportunity to engage participants with the emerging findings from the desk review, with feedback built into the advocacy and knowledge products. Stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds will be invited, bringing together the spaces of disability inclusion in its diversity, and CSE practitioners. The think tank will also consider operational settings and their contextual nuances, both within and outside of formal education.

Phase II

3. **Advocacy and communications tools:** Based on the desk review, needs assessment and the think tank meeting, key rights-based messages will be developed, featuring and amplifying the voices of learners with disabilities. Video and print content will be developed and disseminated through carefully selected channels at key moments. This will be designed to share information on implementation of CSE for learners with disabilities and teachers' needs, as well as to advocate for change of knowledge, attitudes and values around disability inclusive CSE. Advocacy and communications actions will be carefully planned, with content designed to be used for different audiences during a year-long 'soft' information and communication campaign, as well as integrating messaging into wider CSE or inclusive-education events and discussions, e.g. the Global Partnership Forum on CSE conference in 2024.
4. **Good practice briefs:** A set of short, practical briefs will be produced to build the confidence, motivation and skills of curriculum developers, educators and those responsible for pre-service and in-service teacher training. These will address stigma and misconceptions about gender and disability in the context of CSE, and will feature positive examples of successful programmes and practical strategies in different regions that are meeting the CSE needs of learners with a range of different disabilities. In addition, one brief will cover the protection of

²⁰ <https://www.unfpa.org/featured-publication/international-technical-and-programmatic-guidance-out-school-comprehensive>

children and adolescents with disabilities from violence and bullying including sexual violence, abuse and exploitation, with practical advice for parents, caregivers and educators. This can also serve as a good entry point for engaging with parents and others on the value and importance of CSE for this group of learners, by explaining that lack of awareness puts those with disabilities at a much higher risk of sexual abuse and violence.

5. **In-house training:** UNESCO staff at HQ and in the regional and field offices will receive training on disability inclusion, disability-sensitive language and accessibility based on the findings of this suite of work, to equip them with the right tools and knowledge to conduct or support work on disability and CSE, as well as with the right information to understand the main concepts of disability, rights and inclusion and how to incorporate these into their own work.

Outcomes

This work intends to ensure that UNESCO staff and relevant stakeholders from both CSE and disability inclusion contexts have a better understanding of the needs of teachers and learners to make CSE more accessible and inclusive for learners with disabilities, and how to implement CSE for this group, as well as to ensure that a wider community of stakeholders recognize their role in achieving disability-inclusive CSE. The training, advocacy and good practice briefs aim at overcoming misconceptions and providing staff and stakeholders with the right tools to ensure disability-inclusive CSE programming.