

PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY AND ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY IN DAKAR, SENEGAL

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Educating students with disabilities in an inclusive general education setting has been shown to increase academic achievement, increase peer acceptance, increase self-esteem, create a richer friendship network, and have positive lifetime benefits (higher salaried jobs, independent living). In addition, inclusion can have benefits for students without disabilities. The West African nation of Senegal has pledged to increase inclusive education for students with disabilities by 2015. Issues that affect inclusive education for all in Senegal are access to schooling, community and societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities, poverty, and teacher training and pedagogy. To increase inclusive education for all in Senegal the country must increase access to schooling through physical accessibility and decentralization, create community awareness campaigns that increase knowledge of disabilities, and develop teacher training that fosters a student-centered pedagogy.

Current data by UNESCO (2000) and ACPF (2011) find that one in every ten children in Africa has some type of disability. Since the early 1990's, there is movement towards educating students with special needs in an inclusive school environment (Ruijs, Van der Veen & Peetsma, 2010). This international push towards meeting the basic learning needs of all people was first declared at the Jomtien Education for All (EFA) Conference in 1990, and reaffirmed at the ten-year follow up in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa at the 2000 World Education Forum. At the Dakar conference, over 164 government agencies pledged to achieve EFA (UNESCO, 2000). The conference targeted different populations of young, under-served learners – girls, people in poverty, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities – pledging to meet their educational needs by 2015. The participating governments pledged to meet the educational needs of girls, people in poverty, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities by 2015. In addition, the participating governments resolved to make primary education accessible, free, compulsory and of good quality (UNESCO, 2000). For many children with disabilities, a good quality primary education would be in an inclusive school, learning together with their non-disabled peers. The Dakar World Education Forum emphasized the need for national and funding agency policies to reflect broad EFA goals for all, including those with 'special learning needs'. Inclusive education though should not focus exclusively on improving economic development. Inclusion is a matter of social justice, as all human beings are citizens no matter if they happen to have a disability.

Education for All

In April of 2000, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held The World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. The goal of this forum was for the international community to adequately meet the educational needs of all children and adults by 2015. The forum reaffirmed the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All. The Dakar Framework was adopted by Senegal in 2000. For the past 13 years, Senegal has been working towards attaining the framework's six main goals related to a) early childhood care and education; b) access to quality, free, compulsory primary education; c) meeting the learning and access needs of youth and adults; d) improved adult literacy and access to continuing education; e) gender equality in access to quality primary and secondary education; and f) improved quality of education resulting in improved measurable outcomes in literacy, numeracy, and life skills (UNESCO, 2000). UNESCO recommended that to achieve these goals countries pledge to create safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced schools, with rigorous learning for all. There has never been a greater urgency for inclusive public education in Africa, and especially