

<b>Article title</b>	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Secondary Education (Guatemala)
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**Keywords**

1. Inclusive Education
2. Disability
3. Special Education
4. Secondary Education
5. Education Equity
6. Disability Stigma

**Glossary terms**

1. Secondary education: In Guatemala, secondary education is divided into lower secondary (*básico*) and upper secondary (*bachillerato* and *diversificado*) programs. *Básico* programs are compulsory and usually enroll students in their early teenage years; *bachillerato* and *diversificado* programs are not compulsory, and are for students who have graduated from a *básico* program and are able to continue their secondary education.
2. Primary education: In Guatemala, primary education comprises the first 6 years of school, usually starting at age 5. Primary education in Guatemala is compulsory and technically free; however, many children in Guatemala do not complete primary school because their families cannot afford the associated costs (transportation, uniforms, supplies, etc.) and the quality of public primary schools is quite low in rural areas.
3. Disability: The definition of “disability” varies greatly in Guatemala, which leads to skewed data, misinformation, and maltreatment. According to the United Nations, a disability is any kind of long-term impairment that hinders a person’s prospects to engage in their community on an equal foundation with others.
4. Inclusive education: Defined in Guatemala as a joint effort of all aspects of the education system to eradicate or minimize barriers for students.
5. Special education: Defined in Guatemala as an educational provision intended to support students special education needs by providing the services, procedures, tactics, comprehension, and instructional resources to ensure an essential, malleable, and vibrant educational experience. In Guatemala, special education institutions are separate, and

typically focused on one type of disability per institution. Students with mild learning differences are often not included in special education centers, and general education teachers are often unprepared to teach such students, creating a fissure in the education system for these students.

**Text of the article**

**Research on special education, needs and disabilities**

*Primary and secondary education in Guatemala*

The history, context, and current issues related to special education in **secondary education** programs in Guatemala is nearly identical to those that impact **primary education**, and similar information about this issue can be found in the entry about special educational needs and disabilities in primary education in Guatemala in this same volume. In Guatemala, primary school is compulsory and technically free, though there remain significant obstacles to universal primary education in Guatemala (e.g., instruction quality, supply costs, etc.). Secondary education in Guatemala includes *básico* programs (lower secondary; similar to middle or junior high school in the USA or ISCED level 2), which are also compulsory. Secondary education also includes *bachillerato* programs and *diversificado* programs (upper secondary programs). These are programs available to students after they complete *básico*, but they are not compulsory. They are similar to high school and ISCED level 3, but because they are not compulsory, it can be difficult for under-resourced students to find a high-quality, free upper secondary program.

*Historical background/context*

In Guatemala, people with disabilities tend to be under educated, discriminated against, and unable to secure stable work. Guatemala's National Disability Council (CONDAI) estimates that approximately 13% of people living in Guatemala have a **disability**, which puts the proportion of the Guatemalan population with a disability higher than the global average of about 10%. The actual number of people living in Guatemala with

disabilities – which is increasing due to high rates of violence, lack of high-quality healthcare (especially pre-natal and maternal care), endemic poverty, and the lingering aftermath of the 36-year civil war that ended in 1996 (Transitions Foundation, n.d.) – is probably even higher than 13%. In Guatemala, there are serious questions about the accuracy of data and statistics officially reported by the government (Posen, 2017), as well as a lack of families, schools, and other institutions truthfully reporting numbers of disabilities. This is at least partially due to existing confusion about legal and practical definitions of disability in Guatemala.

According to the World Bank, more than 80% of people who have disabilities and live in Latin America are also struggling in severe poverty. This poverty is rooted in a lack of inclusion in quality education programs, leaving students with disabilities with high rates of unemployment due to school dropouts and illiteracy. Rather than living with age-appropriate independence, many students with disabilities live in isolation with their families or caregivers and are not able to participate in an **inclusive education** program. According to the UN's Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016 (UNCRPD), the frequency of abuse, abandonment, neglect, and maltreatment of children and teenagers with disabilities is particularly concerning. The Guatemalan National Survey of People with Disabilities indicates that people with disabilities who live in Guatemala generally have a lower quality of life, greater health issues, struggle with more poverty and greater unemployment, have difficulty accessing buildings and public transportation, and often must rely on their families for support (Polack et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, it is likely that the actual experiences of Guatemalans with disabilities is even worse than the official statistics suggest. Because there is a trend of people with disabilities in Guatemala being unidentified by formal agencies and people (including those with disabilities) who live in remote communities not being included in official data (Posen, 2017), there has long been questions and concerns about the precision

of information provided by the Guatemalan government. This is compounded by the fact that in Guatemala, the census is based on households rather than individuals, and that cultural and community values can influence local definitions of ‘disability’ (Bal et al., 2020). While the number of **special education** programs and teachers in Guatemala are growing (Rodriguez et al., 2008), as of 2006, there were only 165 special education teachers in the entire country. Clearly, this is not adequate to meet the need of special education programs in secondary schools in the country.

The UNCRPD published a report in 2016 regarding how well Guatemala was implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Based on a 2005 survey that they discussed in the 2016 report, the UNCRPD noted that only 10% of students with disabilities in Guatemala successfully finish primary school, and even fewer continue on to some type of secondary program. This is partially because more than 75% of primary students with disabilities are able to gain access to appropriate therapeutic services, and less than half of them could read or write at a level expected for their grade. Because secondary school is not compulsory like primary school is, an even smaller proportion of secondary school-aged children are in school and performing at an expected level.

The Guatemalan government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which they did in 2008, as well as other policies and laws aimed at increasing inclusive education programming. However, based on the 2016 UNCRPD report, questions remain about the inaccessibility of buildings and transportation, as well as general resources and treatment of students with disabilities in Guatemalan schools.

### **Programmes and policies**

In 2012, the Ministry of Social Development in Guatemala was created by the Delegation on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The goal of this ministry is to analyze data and propose and implement appropriate policies that will increase the effectiveness of

support required by students with disabilities. As of 2016, more than 75% of students with a disability were attending school in Guatemala, though the vast majority of these students are primary school students; the numbers of secondary school-aged students who are attending school is much lower. Even with such a high proportion of students with disabilities attending school, the effectiveness of the special education programming in Guatemala has not yet been evaluated in a systematic and complete way.

### **Regulations**

While progress is (slowly) happening in Guatemala to increase the quality of programming for primary school students with disabilities, not much is happening in the realm of secondary schools. The Ministry of Education has adopted policies that require schools to include students with disabilities in the classroom, there are no expectations regarding the quality of the instruction, training of teachers, or accessibility of classrooms and school buildings – yet the ministry claims the education system in Guatemala is accessible because special education access is mandated (Werning et al., 2016). The system of vocational education programs in Guatemala, which would theoretically provide support and education to a number of secondary school-aged teenagers is severely under-resourced and underdeveloped.

### **Resources**

The government of Guatemala continues to struggle to implement the changes needed to support secondary school students with disabilities. In the meantime, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit foundations, and other charities are attempting to provide this education. The support these organizations provide to these students is important and helpful, but is not truly an inclusive education because the secondary students with disabilities are often attending these schools in ways that separate

them from their typically-developing peers. This creates an implied exclusion rather than increasing inclusion.

### **Teachers and teaching**

The challenges that secondary school students with disabilities face is not limited to the policies, procedures, and resources of the Guatemalan government and Ministry of Education. Teachers report feeling unprepared and unqualified to provide special education support to students who need it. Students with disabilities often face prejudice and stigma, which can be an obstacle for their families to send them to school – suggesting that a large portion of secondary school-aged adolescents are not attending school because they and their families cannot overcome the inherent social shame and discrimination.

### **School personnel**

In order to increase access to secondary education for students with disabilities, it would be beneficial for the government of Guatemala to make secondary education compulsory and provide more funding for high-quality public secondary schools. This funding and support must include improving physical and social access to the schools, and needs to happen before the students enroll (rather than as a post hoc remedy after students begin attending). The funding and resourcing must also include high-quality training for teachers and other school personnel about pedagogical techniques and approaches for students with developmental and learning disabilities. These necessary changes will only occur, however, after a comprehensive and precise inquiry of the number of secondary school-aged children with disabilities are actually still excluded from the secondary school system.

**Further reading and online resources**

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