

Article title	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Primary Education (Guatemala)
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Regional Editor	Thomas DeVere Wolsey
Editor in Chief	Maria Giovanna Brauzzi
DATE LAST MODIFIED	Thursday, 09 June 2022

<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350934399.002>

Keywords

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

Glossary terms

1. Disability: According to the United Nations, disability refers to “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.” According to the Transitions Foundation, the definition of “disability” tends to vary widely in Guatemala, which can account for skewed data, misinformation, and mistreatment in Guatemala for people with disabilities.
2. Inclusive education: Defined in Guatemala as a joint effort of all processes to eliminate or minimize the barriers that limit learning or participation in the education system of the student.
3. Special education: Defined in Guatemala as an educational service designed to attend to people with special educational needs the required joint services, techniques, strategies, knowledge, and pedagogical resources to ensure an integral, flexible, and dynamic education. In Guatemala, special education centers are separated, and typically focused on one type of disability center per institution. For example, a school for the blind would only attend students with particular disabilities. They are also highly focused on physical disabilities, and less severe learning disabilities are often excluded from these institutions. Students with mild learning disabilities are often unable to be included in special education centers, nor are the general education teachers prepared to teach them in an inclusive education school, therefore leaving a gap in the education system for these students.

Historical Background/Context

People with disabilities in Guatemala are often undereducated, stigmatized, and lack stable work. According to the National Disability Council of Guatemala (CONDAI), 12-14% of the Guatemalan population has some type of **disability**, which is a higher proportion than the global average of 10%. This proportion has been increasing rapidly in Guatemala due to violence, lack of quality maternal and prenatal health care, as well as poverty and injuries remaining from the 36-year-long civil war that ended in 1996 (Transitions Foundation, n.d.). It is also likely that the percentage of people with disabilities in Guatemala is much higher than reported by CONDAI due to a serious lack of families, schools, and medical professionals reporting disabilities, confusion surrounding the definition of a disability, and various groups of people (e.g., rural communities and indigenous communities) who are often unaccounted for in official national statistics (Posen, 2017).

The World Bank estimates that within Latin America, around 82% of people with disabilities are also living in poverty. This stems from their lack of inclusion in quality educational programs that meet their specific needs, therefore leading to high school dropouts rates, high illiteracy rates, and extremely low employment rates. Many people with disabilities live in isolation, with families, or with caregivers rather than living independently or participating in an **inclusive education**. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), stated in 2016 that they are concerned with the frequency of maltreatment, abuse, and abandonment of children with disabilities. In general, the National Survey of People with Disabilities found that people with disabilities in Guatemala report a lower quality of life due to health issues, greater poverty, inaccessible buildings and transportation, high unemployment, and more reliance of families (Polack et al., 2017).

Despite these statistics about people with disabilities in Guatemala, it can be assumed that these numbers are much graver, given that many people with disabilities are often

unidentified and/or living in remote communities that are not being included in these statistics, and that there have long been issues regarding the completeness and accuracy of statistics provided by the Guatemalan government (Posen, 2017). Many people are left uncounted because the census is based on households rather than individuals, and the definition of ‘disability’ varies based on community and cultural values (Bal et al., 2020). In 2006, the Ministry of Education of Guatemala reported only 165 special education teachers in the entire country; fortunately, however, because of new University programs and a greater emphasis from the Guatemalan Ministry of Education, this number is growing (Rodriguez et al., 2008).

In 2016, the UNCRPD produced an initial report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This report concluded that in a 2005 survey, they found that only 10% of students with disabilities in Guatemala complete primary school. They also found that 77% of these students, at primary school age, did not have “access to rehabilitation services and 53% could not read or write” at a grade-appropriate level (UNCRPD, 2016, p. 1). In order to address these alarming rates of inequity for primary school students with disabilities, Guatemala ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities within Guatemala in 2008 with the goal of implementing more inclusive education policies and special education laws. During this conference, many additional questions were raised regarding the structure of buildings to make them more accessible to students with disabilities, punishment and discipline tactics used in schools, and the lack of resources for students with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2016).

Current Policies and Implementation

In response to the concerns discussed above, the Delegation on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities created the Ministry of Social Development in Guatemala in 2012, in order to analyze data and construct appropriate policies to better support people with disabilities in

Guatemala. By 2016, 82% of students with disabilities were attending school. Despite the law in Guatemala requiring access to special education and the guarantee of people with disabilities to be included in the education system, the effectiveness of these programs has yet to be fully analyzed.

In an attempt to increase access and inclusivity for people with disabilities, the Ministry of Education has also developed scholarship programs for students with disabilities as well as various training programs in inclusive education for primary school teachers. Despite the Ministry of Education adopting an inclusive education policy and requiring that schools include students with disabilities in the classroom, those laws and policies do not oblige schools or teachers to meet a specific level of instructional quality, training of teachers, or adaptations in school and classroom infrastructure. The Ministry of Education identifies the education system as inclusive because of mandated access, but does not consider any sort of quality control to ensure that mandated access is accomplished (Werning et al., 2016).

While schools are required to provide high quality inclusive primary education for all students, based on anecdotal evidence many teachers report not taking any classes in their teacher education programs on special education techniques or pedagogy, nor do they feel prepared to have students with disabilities in their classrooms. The stigma faced by students with disabilities tends to hinder families from sending their students to school, therefore indicating that there is likely a large portion of children with disabilities not accounted for by the primary schools. The proportion of primary school-aged children with disabilities who are not receiving the legally-mandated inclusive primary education they are entitled to will be unknown until better, more complete counts are completed by the Guatemalan government.

While the government of Guatemala has yet to make significant improvements in special education at the primary school level, many more primary school students are

receiving special education because of the work of specialized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other non-profit foundations and organizations. Many of these NGOs and other groups focus on providing services, including primary education, to children with specific disabilities, both physical and developmental. While this is helpful to many primary school students in certain circumstances, it is not truly inclusive education, as the primary school students with disabilities are often separated from their typically-developing peers. Moving forward, the primary schools in Guatemala need to be funded and equipped with the infrastructure and staffing to support students with disabilities. This resourcing needs to occur before primary school students with special needs arrive at a school, and must include teachers highly trained in the intricacies of learning disabilities as well as other developmental disabilities. This type of support depends on a complete and accurate analysis of how many students with disabilities are truly still be excluded from the primary school system.

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Concluding observations on the initial report of Guatemala.

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