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Education of Children with Disabilities: Voices from Around the World

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Introduction

The year 2015 represents the target date for achieving the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education for All. In fact, the right to education was laid out in 1948 with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights; which states in Article 26 that "Everyone has the right to education."¹ The worldwide need for basic education is well documented; however, far too many of the world's children are not receiving even a basic education, putting them at further disadvantage. Approximately 140 million children are out of school, a majority being girls and children with disabilities. Those most vulnerable to school exclusion include children living in poverty, remote areas, and conflict/refugee situations; children from migrant families, indigenous families or minority language groups; children living with HIV/AIDS, other health conditions and disabilities; and girls.² When these conditions co-occur, as they often do, these children face compounded difficulties in accessing even their most basic human rights, including even the rudiments of a primary education. In fact, only 56% of all young children with disabilities worldwide have access to any pre-primary services,³ and there are countless others within school systems not receiving quality education.⁴ The reasons for children with disabilities being excluded from school are various, but as Rousso⁵ points out, the most common reasons are inaccessibility, poverty and discrimination.

Murdick, Shore, Chittooran and Gartin⁶ discuss the concept of "otherness" and its subsequent impact on the treatment of persons with disabilities. They argue that the perception of persons with disabilities as "other" leads to the often exaggerated assumption that persons with disabilities are different, giving way to negative stereotyping and prejudice. Historically, this prejudice has led to the segregation of persons with disabilities. This segregation has a particularly profound impact when it comes to education with the result often being either separate schools or classrooms or the denial of educational access altogether.

While the concept of disability as "otherness" continues to persist, the perception of this "otherness" is changing and giving way to the recognition that segregation is no longer advisable or acceptable, thus, many countries are reaching a threshold of inclusion. The threshold of inclusion marks the collective realization that segregation of persons with disabilities is not acceptable and is a violation of human rights. As various cultural views of disability cross this threshold, it becomes no longer culturally acceptable to separate, stigmatize, hide, or discriminate against persons with disabilities and the acceptance of social justice, equal citizenship, and the recognition of human rights become the accepted

cultural norms. With regard to education, Satz⁷ posits that because educational goals are in part based on equal citizenship, they have an important duty to perform in breaking down stereotypes among different groups and fostering intergroup knowledge and understanding. Inclusive education has gained momentum with increasing examples of successful inclusion programs around the world.^{2,8,9} With inclusive education as a common goal and increasing examples of good practice, countries worldwide can learn from one another.¹⁰

The importance of the rights of both children and adults with disabilities is becoming recognized by the majority of countries around the world. With 147 signatories to the 2006 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), disability rights are an issue upon which nations can agree. Article 7 of the CRPD affirms the right of children with disabilities to the enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children and recognizes their need for special protection. Further, Article 24 entitles children with disabilities to an equal and inclusive education; which according to UNESCO, is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs, while enriching lives.⁴ Furthermore, the World Declaration on Education for All¹¹ specifically mentions in Article 3, paragraph 5, that steps should be taken to ensure the education of children with disabilities. However, despite the recent attention on the rights of children with disabilities, there continues to be a void in internationally available information and research; especially with regards to girls with disabilities.⁵ While more research exists in developed countries, there is a significant shortage of literature providing an international perspective on the education of children with disabilities.⁸

In 2009, the Public Policy Research Institute, in partnership with the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development (DIIFSD), Qatar, initiated an international study on the status of children with disabilities and their families entitled *Children and the International Landscape of Disabilities* (Project CHILD).⁸ A primary goal of Project CHILD was to initiate a global dialogue and report on experiences and information drawn from people with expertise in the disability field in an effort to expand existing international knowledge of children with disabilities and provide recommendations based upon shared experiences. This research was guided in part by the concept that social inclusion of children with disabilities, coupled with inclusive education, is a shared goal by the majority of disability advocates around the world, thus, the expectation was that common issues would be discussed by even the most disparate nations. The full report, available at

<http://ppri.tamu.edu/projectchild/>, provides more information about all aspects of this research and presents examples of “programs of promise” identified through Project CHILD.

Based on lessons learned from Project CHILD, the Public Policy Research Institute initiated a follow up report on the special circumstances of women and girls with disabilities around the world. This project, entitled *Women and the Landscape of Disabilities* (Project WORLD), enhanced our knowledge on the compounded discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities around the world. In countries where opportunities for women in general are limited; opportunities for women with disabilities are often nonexistent with many suffering neglect and abuse. However, despite the overwhelming evidence of discrimination and hardship, interviewees often reflected on the increased realization that the key to increased opportunity and acceptance for women with disabilities begins with education.

Methods

The goal of both Project CHILD and Project WORLD was to utilize qualitative research methods to describe the situation of women and children with disabilities in a variety of cultural contexts, to initiate conversations to increase awareness of common issues, and to expand upon international research. An interview protocol was developed for qualitative interviews with people with expertise in the field of disability. Once the interviews were conducted and dialogue was analyzed into themes, researchers then asked participants to respond to these themes by ranking their level of agreement/disagreement in a theme confirmation survey. This survey added to the validity of the qualitative data by confirming the interview analysis results as well as providing a quantitative component.

Development of Interview Items

To gain insight and a broader perspective on capturing the most relevant information, over 50 people who work in the disability field were emailed the question, “If you were given an opportunity to talk with experts in childhood disability from various countries and cultures around the world, what information would you want to know?” Thirty-two people responded and their suggestions informed the development of interview questions. The final interview instrument consisted of 20 open-response items that queried people on a variety of topics, such as available services, priorities and family. Following pilot testing, the interview questions and protocol were approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board

(IRB). A parallel method was followed for development of Project WORLD questions.

Identifying and Confirming Participants

In 2009, a variety of sources documented the existence of 229 countries worldwide, although there were some discrepancies. Project staff examined diverse countries that were representative of the world's population and developed a priority list of countries for inclusion in the study. Attempts were then made to gain a representative sample of people from a variety of countries and cultures. Locating participants in various countries required a multi-faceted approach. Using a convenience sampling model, techniques included internet searches, literature reviews, personal referrals, disability organization websites, and authorship of relevant articles. Participants in the interviews and confirmation survey were: persons who served women and/or children with disabilities and their families through provision of direct services; program administration or policy creation; and were knowledgeable about disability issues and services in their country.

Ultimately, countries in which interview participants worked provided a representative sample of the four levels of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI).¹² The HDI combines three measures: health, knowledge, and standard of living. Countries that have a high HDI have populations with longer life expectancies, higher adult literacy rates and a higher gross domestic product per capita. These countries also showed higher rates of primary school enrollment when compared to lower ranked countries. A map of countries interviewed can be found in Figure 1. In addition, a complete listing of the countries in which the participants lived/worked can be found in Appendix A.

Conducting Interviews

Once a participant was confirmed, project research staff emailed a standardized letter clarifying the interview process. They were given the option to respond to the interview items via email, Skype or telephone. Participants were then emailed the interview questions and the *Informed Consent Form* prior to their scheduled interview. Previewing the materials offered the opportunity to become familiar with the questions and provided time for forethought prior to the interview. Preparation was particularly important since most interviews were conducted in English, which was not the first language of many participants. As described in the *Informed Consent Form*, participants were asked at both the beginning and end of the interviews if they wanted their responses to be confidential or to waive

confidentiality. All interviews were audio recorded and trained researchers captured discussion topics by taking detailed notes. Interviews were conversational and interactive so that clarifications could be provided or cultural nuances explained. The opinions expressed are participants' personal perspectives and not necessarily those of the organizations where they work or the countries in which they live.

Theme Analysis

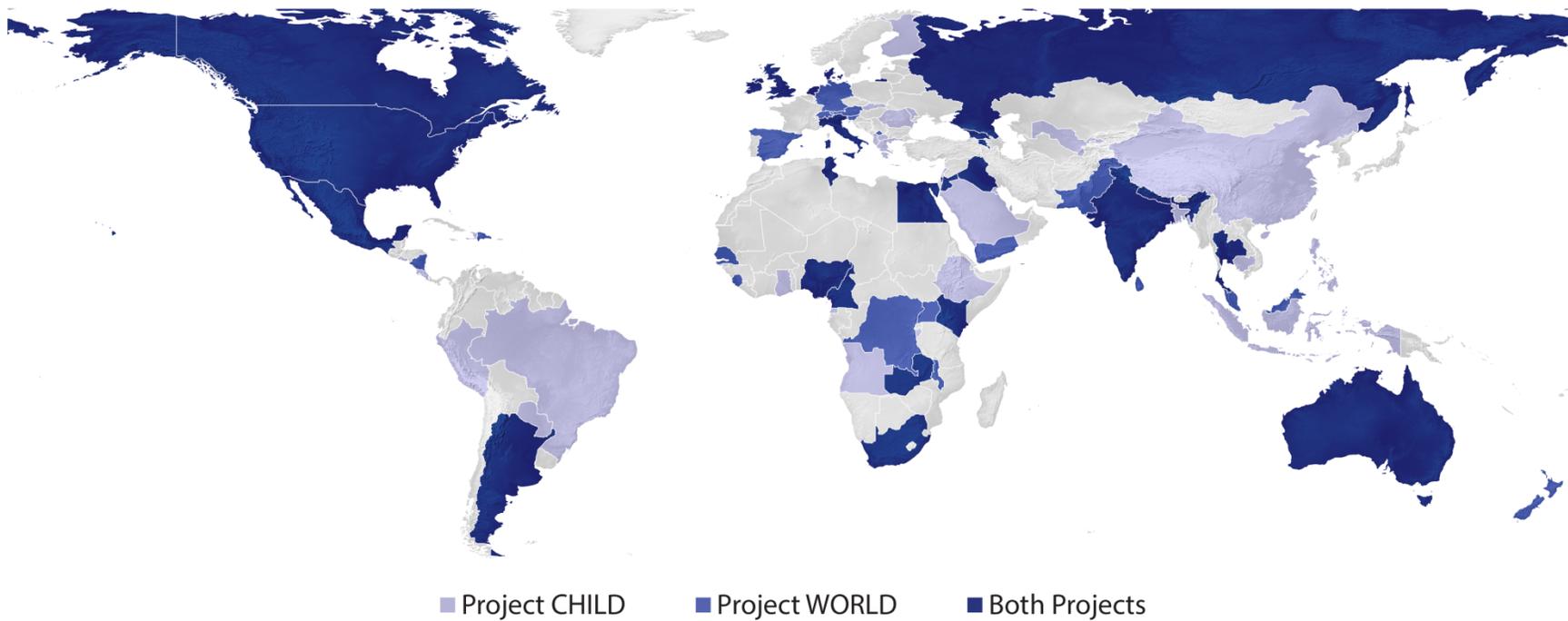
A qualitative analysis of the dialogue from the 177 interviews identified common themes regarding women and children with disabilities. The analysis consisted of at least two trained researchers reviewing the interview notes and documenting the frequency that common topics were mentioned, along with duration and intensity of the discussion, and synthesizing topics into theme areas. The analysis further showed that these themes were surprisingly similar, even among disparate countries. Examples included few educational options, limited physical accessibility of the environment, lack of resources providing family support, and poor quality health care.

Theme Confirmation Survey

To verify if these themes were indeed prevailing in each country and for internal validity, a follow-up electronic survey measured how strongly each participant agreed or disagreed with the accuracy of topics included under each theme. By using a Likert-type rating scale, survey results added quantitative confirmation to the rich qualitative interview narratives. Each participant was emailed an invitation to participate in the survey and was provided with a unique single-use survey token. Follow-up reminders were sent every week for three weeks to those who had not yet completed the survey. Text fields were provided for participants to add additional comments as well.

Figure 1: Countries Interviewed

Countries Interviewed for Projects CHILD and WORLD



Results

Through analysis of the interviews and survey responses various topics concerning the education of children with disabilities emerged. The consistency of theme content was quite compelling given the openness of the interview questions. Major education related themes included exclusion from school and barriers to education, with a particular focus on the girl child, quality of education, and inclusive education. These main ideas were identified based on the emphasis placed on each topic, consistency across interviews, and the length of time topics were discussed. The survey results validated interview responses (see Figures 2 and 3).

While considering each emergent theme, it is important to acknowledge all of their interconnectedness and overlap. Most noticeably, the cultural views of disability discussed by interviewees provided a lens through which one can examine many of the other themes. As stated previously, the perception of disability, as “otherness” is in large part shaped by cultural nuances. Cultural views that are accepting of disability as a natural part of life recognize the value of education for children with disabilities and therefore provide more opportunities and accessibility. On the other hand, cultural views that are less accepting, even those viewing disability as a curse or source of shame, are less likely to embrace practices like inclusive education. So, while cultural views have a significant impact on education, the reverse can also be argued. That is, education can and does have an impact on cultural views. As more children with disabilities receive an education, participate in inclusive settings with their age peers without disabilities, and become effective self-advocates and active citizens, cultural views of disability are likely to cross the threshold and embrace inclusion.

When asked “What, in your opinion, are the three biggest priorities for children with disabilities in your country?” a majority of participants identified quality educational services for children with disabilities in the top three. Education of children with disabilities emerged as a major theme with nearly every participant discussing the topic to some degree despite there being no specific questions about education. Participants reflected that although progress was slow and more should be done to ensure quality, several countries currently have educational policies targeting children with disabilities. Because the purpose of Project CHILD and Project WORLD was to open a dialogue, results are presented from this dialogue in quotation format, so that the voices of the participants are directly heard.

Exclusion from School

Of critical concern is the exclusion of children with disabilities from school. The main reasons given were: parents did not believe their child would benefit; children were hidden at home for social reasons; the school building was not physically accessible; and the administrators or teachers refused to admit children because of their disabilities. Also of paramount importance is that in many countries, education is neither “public” nor “free.” Many participants expressed concern over the low rates of school attendance for children with disabilities in their respective countries.

“Quite a low percent of children with disabilities are able to access the schools or attend mainstream schools, and though the number of these kids is increasing, it is still not very high...Most schools are not ready to accept children with disabilities... They do not have enough resources, they are not accessible, and the teachers are not ready to work with kids [with disabilities].”

Natia Partskhaladze, Georgia

“In the countryside, even if there is a school in the area he [child with disabilities] will not expect to go to school because he would be totally stigmatized and the family would not want him to go to school.”

Mesfin Taye, Ethiopia

Efforts also need to focus on increasing parental awareness of the advantages of education for children with disabilities. Many participants discussed the fear some parents have of subjecting their child to teasing, stigma, or other cruelties inflicted by students, teachers, and others at school. The fear was described as the child would be unnecessarily ridiculed or abused, while not experiencing meaningful benefits from school attendance. The parents’ understanding is that the threshold of inclusion has not been crossed by members of their community, whether founded or not, which often leads to the practice of keeping their child protected in their home. These views resonated throughout many interviews.

“I have a colleague and one of her upper limbs is paralyzed. When someone that doesn’t know her sees her, they don’t

see her disability. But, at home her parents did not want her to go to school; not because they didn't want her to learn, but because they were afraid that outside of the confines of their home she would have suffered mockery from society and the other school children. She stayed home until the age of 14 and only started school at that time. Can you imagine starting your first class at 14?" [translated from French]
Equatorial Guinea

Even when parents show extreme commitment to their child's education, other obstacles often arise that prohibit the child from attending. Many schools are not physically accessible to children with mobility impairments. Schools lacking ramps, wide doorways, and accessible toilets are inhospitable for many children, which often make their attendance impossible. The following account illustrates the importance of accessible schools, as well as the need for mobility aids and accommodations, such as wheelchairs and ramps, in many parts of the world:

"The school buildings are old and have lots of stairs, which make it impossible for children with mobility limitations to even get in the building, so most children with disabilities are either kept at home or are sent to institutions. There have been cases though of very dedicated parents carrying their child to school every day and staying with their child to carry them from class to class."
Moldova

These remarks were mirrored by the survey where 69% of participants worldwide agreed that many children with disabilities do not attend school at all. Further, 60% of respondents indicated that girls with disabilities are excluded from school more than boys with disabilities, while 86% also agreed that girls with disabilities are excluded from school more than girls without disabilities.

Women and Girls

Women and girls with disabilities have fewer educational and employment opportunities than women without disabilities, men, or men with disabilities. Key discussion points emerging during the conversations were the lack of both educational and employment options, which lead to lifelong economic dependence, poverty, and social isolation. Discussion

revealed two frequently identified beliefs that particularly impact access to education. First, girls with disabilities are not worthy of educational opportunities. Second, girls with disabilities need to be protected by remaining in the safe environments of home and family. Thus, they are often overprotected by their well-meaning families and denied access to education and social opportunities. In communities where the physical and social movement of women in general is rigidly prescribed, many girls and women with disabilities rarely leave the home of their birth during their entire lifetime.

Many interviewees discussed how families restrict the movement of their daughters with disabilities in particular because of concerns about their safety, fears that people will harm, sexually coerce or otherwise take advantage of them.

“The most particular issue is that the parents don’t give opportunities to girls or women. You have the services sometimes, but the culture of the place doesn’t give opportunities to women. The family for example won’t carry the girl to school, like they would a son. It’s a mix between security and safety and the belief that the woman’s place is in the home.”

Beatriz Zoppi, Argentina

“The family is very overprotective of daughters because they don’t want to take any risk that she is sexually abused.”

Prashant Sude, India

“It’s a struggle. I’ve seen it in my family because you can see the larger families struggling with the decision on whether they should accept or not accept some advantage to allow their daughters to go to school. I had that challenge. When my parents wanted to send me to school after my disability was diagnosed, my uncles and cousins had difficulties with that.”

Ola abu Alghaib, Palestine

“There are three major reasons why girls with disabilities aren’t being sent to school. The first reason is that parents think it is unproductive for girls to go to school and since they cannot utilize this

education for income generation so why should they send them to the school. Another thing is that when the parents send a girl with a disability to school, society knows that there is a person with a disability at the home and the marriage chance will decrease for all family members of the girl. The third part is that there is overprotection from the family. They think it is better to keep the girl in the house and is better for her security due to the risk of sexual violation.”

Birendra Raj Pokharel, Nepal

Interviewees also discussed the perceptions that women with disabilities would never achieve economic independence nor would they become productive members of their communities. Therefore girls are denied opportunities to pursue an education, as it was not financially practical to do so. These discussions reflect economic realities for girls and women in many areas of the world.

“Parents will opt to educate the boy because they believe boys are more meaningful in the family and the society ...Here in Africa we expect children to take care of their parents, so parents are going to invest in them. So, if you have a disability—and more if you are female—then the family most of the time will not invest in you. You will not have a husband; you will not get a dowry. Here, the man’s family gets a dowry when a woman marries into the family. If you are a woman with a disability they will not expect any dowry from you. No man will ask for your hand. You will not be employed, you will have no income and you will always be dependent.”

Jane Kihungi, Kenya

Due to cultural and religious beliefs, many women have their physical and social movement restricted, which greatly limits their interactions and opportunities for both formal education and informal learning about life. Where these restrictions occur, they are more firmly enforced for girls and women with disabilities. Interviewees talked about the belief that women should be physically and socially “kept in the home.”

“Social exclusion is not the same for men because men leave the house and speak with each other and find out about their problem. But the girls and women, especially outside the capital, they cannot go out because of our religion because of our customs, because the women are less than men in Arab world.”
Asia Yagi, Jordan

“In the northern part of Nigeria we have a large Muslim community. Boys have better experiences more than the girls because women are not allowed to come out of the house in the first place. The religion doesn’t allow them to come out of the house, but men and the boys can.”
Patience Ogolo, Nigeria

Quality of Education

Many participants discussed the quality of education for children with disabilities. Ideally, a high quality education prepares children for adult life and helps them reach their full potential. However, according to many, the quality of the educational system for children with disabilities is poor and does little to prepare them for an independent adulthood. According to the survey, 72% of participants agreed that the quality of education for children with disabilities remains inadequate in their countries. One of the main reasons cited for poor quality is the low educational expectations for students with disabilities held by teachers, parents, and community members. The often prevailing view of children with disabilities as helpless and dependent prevents efforts at increasing educational quality. Educating children with disabilities needs to be viewed as a worthwhile investment of resources. Participants reported that low expectations for children with disabilities remain a problem in many countries.

“Parents have problems sending a child with disabilities to school because they believe that they are unproductive, that they cannot accomplish anything.” [translated from French]
Equatorial Guinea

“I went to visit a family in a very rural area of the country and realized that they had a young daughter who was always banging her head against the wall in a back room and

injuring herself. The girl, who seemed to have mental health issues, would yell for no reason and the parents kept her hidden at home. I told the mother to send her daughter to an NGO to try to get some services for her and the mother said, 'Why bother, she is just going to stay home with me anyway'."

Bakary Sogoba, Burundi

Because of low educational expectations for children with disabilities coupled with the belief that education will afford little benefit; the quality of education for children with disabilities remains dismal in many parts of the world according to numerous participants. If the belief persists in their community that children with disabilities will make little contribution, there is limited motivation or pressure to provide any level of education.

In many countries, children with disabilities do not receive an education nor are they taught vocational or independent living skills that will benefit them as adults. Participants from several regions of the world described the quality of the education system for children with disabilities in their respective countries.

"Unfortunately the special schools that I've come across are not really that helpful in progressing children [with disabilities] forward like you would expect. They're more like a daycare arrangement."

Kenya

"A lot of the facilities that provide special education and even inclusive settings provide a very low quality of education. So children are hardly ever able to move up from one level to the other."

Samuel Kabue, Kenya

This lack of quality and little concern about the education of children with disabilities has led to some unfortunate outcomes as illustrated in the following example.

"We have a lot of dyslexic children. They keep them in the schools and they're not learning anything. They take the parents money and don't do anything with them. They keep them there until they reach 12 or 13 and then there is

nowhere else for them to go because after 12 or 13 is secondary school and you have to do an exam to go into secondary school and they cannot pass the exam. What will they do with these children? They just stay at home. They get in trouble and they become hard criminals.”

Name and Country Withheld

Even in countries that have comparatively well-developed education systems for children with disabilities, there are lingering doubts about the quality of these educational programs. When education is of low quality, it does not prepare children for the future. Ideally, the quality of education should be equal for all children. However, in many areas of the world equality for children with disabilities was seldom reported.

Separate Special Schools versus Inclusive Education

Almost all participants interviewed discussed their country's efforts at providing some level of inclusive education indicating a move toward the threshold of inclusion. According to UNESCO, inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs, while enriching lives.⁴ The goals of inclusive education are to provide quality education programs, to end discrimination and foster social cohesion by including children of all ability levels in the same schools and classrooms with specialized instructional methodologies and individualized supports. Some countries are just beginning this process, others report well developed systems. As interviews progressed, the complexity of implementing inclusive education began to unfold. While there is a growing body of research in support of inclusive education and many governments have laws in favor of inclusive education, there remain many challenges to full implementation including reluctance of both teachers and parents. The idea that the child needs to fit into the educational system is often difficult to replace with the concept that the educational system needs to continually adjust to meet the needs of each child. Of particular interest are descriptions of cases where parents of typically developing children refused to have their children educated alongside children with disabilities. At the same time, many parents of children with disabilities expressed reluctance to move their children from familiar special schools to the inclusive environment of mainstreamed classrooms. The majority of participants interviewed described their country's educational system as a mix of both segregated and inclusive schools.

“There is pressure to provide services that are one hundred percent inclusive and there is pressure to supply a healthy specialized or segregated sector and as a result the government doesn’t know which way to turn...On the one hand they have to meet their budget and on the other hand have to meet the needs of the families who want totally different provisions, so they end up with a mixed economy of inclusive and special provision.”

Peter Farrell, United Kingdom

This statement illustrates that even when inclusive education is available, many families prefer having their children with disabilities educated in special schools or classrooms. While each family has reasons for their choice, one often stated in support of separate programs is the belief that both the quality of education and level of needed supports are inferior or non-existent in inclusive environments.

“I don’t think there’s a real choice. Theoretically there’s the option to send your child to a mainstream school, however many families would think that’s not an option because that school wouldn’t be able to meet their child’s needs and often it’s a huge struggle to get appropriate levels of support in education at school.”

Stephanie Gotlib, Australia

In many developing countries, parents truly have no choice. In some cases, participants described inclusive education as the only option because special schools are too far away for families to bring their child. In many areas of Slovakia, if a child lives within reasonable distance of a special school, that would typically be the family’s first choice; but if the distance is too far and the disability relatively mild they attend a regular school in their community. In many countries, inclusion remains an option only when the child’s disability is mild and can be easily accommodated.

“Its [inclusive education] relatively easy to do with people with single physical disabilities or mild cognitive disabilities. Once you get into more complex cognitive disabilities it’s very hard, but I think it would be fair to say that the progress toward social inclusive education has been strong particularly over the last decade, but there’s still a way to go.”

Ron McCallum, Australia

“There are special schools, but often the parents will put their child in a normal school until the teacher gets to the point where she says ‘no, I can’t look after this kid.’ At that point the child will be often pulled out of school altogether unless the parents have money and can send the child to a special school.”

Kenya

It is also difficult to determine if references to inclusive education refer to adherence to the specific model of modifying the system to meet the instructional needs of all children, or simply attempting to fit children with disabilities in the classroom or school without necessarily meeting their specialized needs. The following statement illustrates how inclusion without proper supports actually fails to recognize the diversity of disability:

“In our educational system there is integration principle, not inclusion principle. A child can be integrated into the educational system after he or she adapts to the majority.”

Maria Duracinska, Slovakia

Another obstacle that participants commented on was the reluctance of parents of typically developing children having their children educated alongside children with disabilities.

“Parents of children without disabilities think that it’s to the disadvantage of their child to be in a class where children with disabilities are because they think that the education is slowing down.”

Stig Langvad, Denmark

“We had cases in some Kindergartens where some parents of typical children moved their children to another Kindergarten...We need to consider them [children with disabilities] not as a problem, but as a resource.”

Fulvia V. Tomatis, Macedonia

These comments illustrate the belief that inclusive education benefits the child with disabilities to the detriment of typically developing

children in the classroom. Proponents argue that because the system is student centered, inclusive education meets the learning needs of all children. Additionally, the awareness, acceptance, and understanding of differences as well as opportunities for interacting with children of all abilities are of paramount importance when creating and reinforcing positive attitudes toward disability.

“My youngest son went to a really excellent inclusive day care center when he was a little boy and right through school had kids with disabilities in his classroom. He came home in the twelfth grade to tell me ‘oh mom, guess who’s president of our high school?’...He told me it was this kid Sam...A boy with Cerebral Palsy, doesn’t speak, uses a voice synthesizer, has an aide in the classroom to help him, he uses a wheelchair and the student body elected him president of the high school. I think this is because this is the generation that’s grown up experiencing inclusion and the fact that he uses a wheelchair and voice synthesizer doesn’t matter.”

Debra Mayer, Canada

Proponents believe that strong inclusive education systems are vital for full social inclusion to occur. Children with disabilities who are instructed in special schools or classrooms, especially residential placements, miss the opportunity to interact with typically developing children and typically developing children miss the opportunity to interact with them. While the intention may be “separate, but equal,” clearly segregated education is not equal. Furthermore, in many countries when children with disabilities are sent to special residential schools they are deprived of their right, as outlined in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, to remain with their family and community. Integrating children of varying backgrounds and ability levels throughout childhood leads to greater understanding and acceptance for all.

“The earlier they [children in the community, both typically developing and with disabilities] see each other as playmates and friends, the easier it is all the rest of the way in life.”

Elizabeth Bauer, United States

While there remain barriers to inclusive education in many countries including teacher preparation, financial resources, acceptance by stakeholders, physical access to all areas in school buildings, and negative attitudes; a variety of evidence supports the effectiveness of quality inclusive education. Participants worldwide emphasized that its implementation is a priority.

“Now in Peru, we are living in a time of inclusion. Everybody talks about inclusion, the Ministry of Education talks about this and we have the law, but it’s not enough. Inclusion is in Lima, but in other cities, no...The community needs time to learn more about inclusion.”

Maria Graciela Laynes Valdivia, Peru

“Educators are being taught inclusion as the norm and are entering the classroom expecting it.”

Debra Mayer, Canada

Debra Mayer went on to describe how these teachers often meet resistance from school administrators who are set in their ways and reluctant to cross the threshold toward full inclusive education. However, as more newly trained teachers enter the classroom expecting inclusion, acceptance grows.

Through interviews across many countries, the implementation of inclusive education and all of its complexities became apparent. Additionally, 60% of participants agreed with the statement, “Schools do not include children with disabilities in the regular/general education classroom in my country”, while one-third disagreed when answering the survey.

Figure 2: Theme Analysis Results for Education

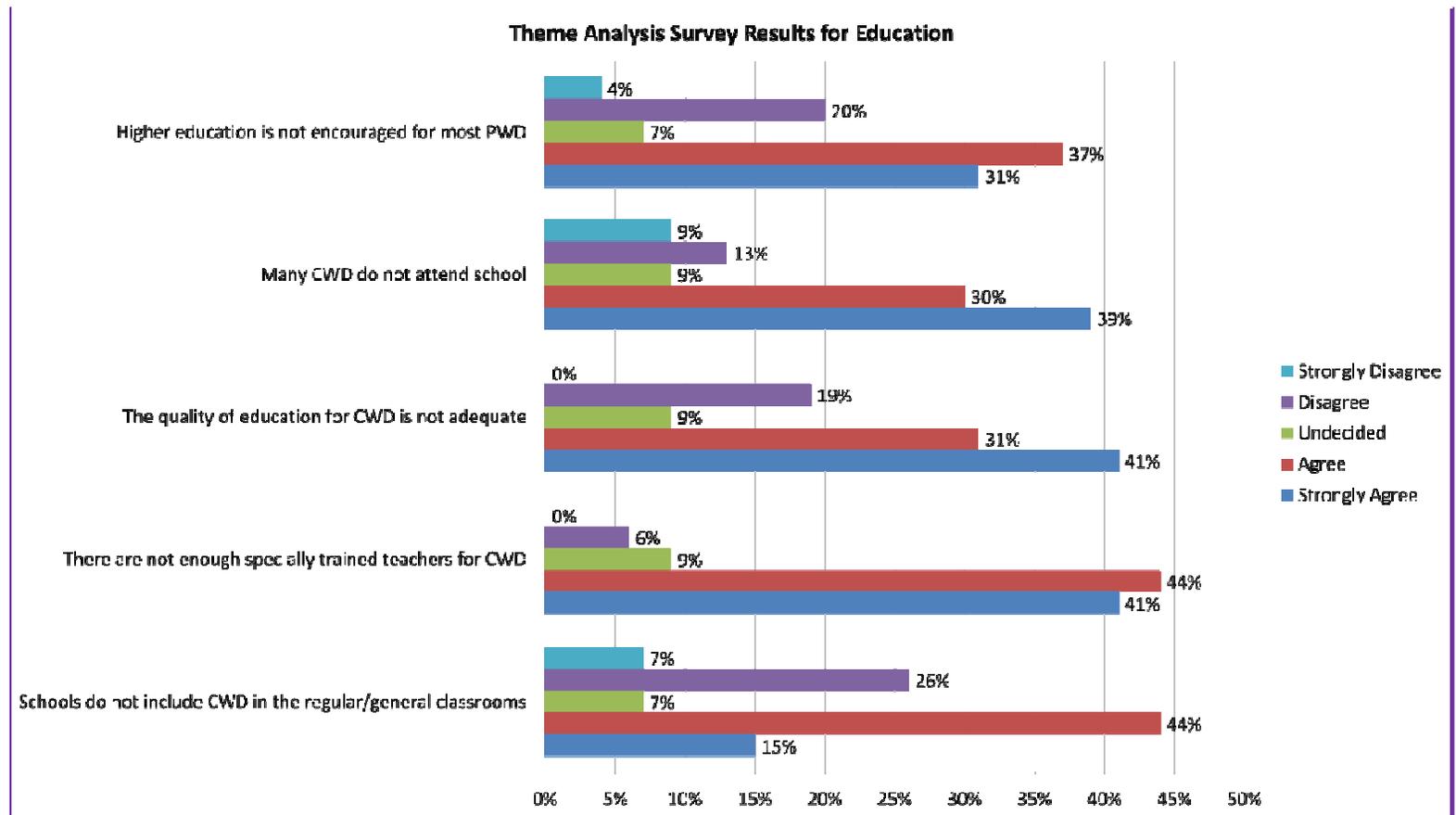
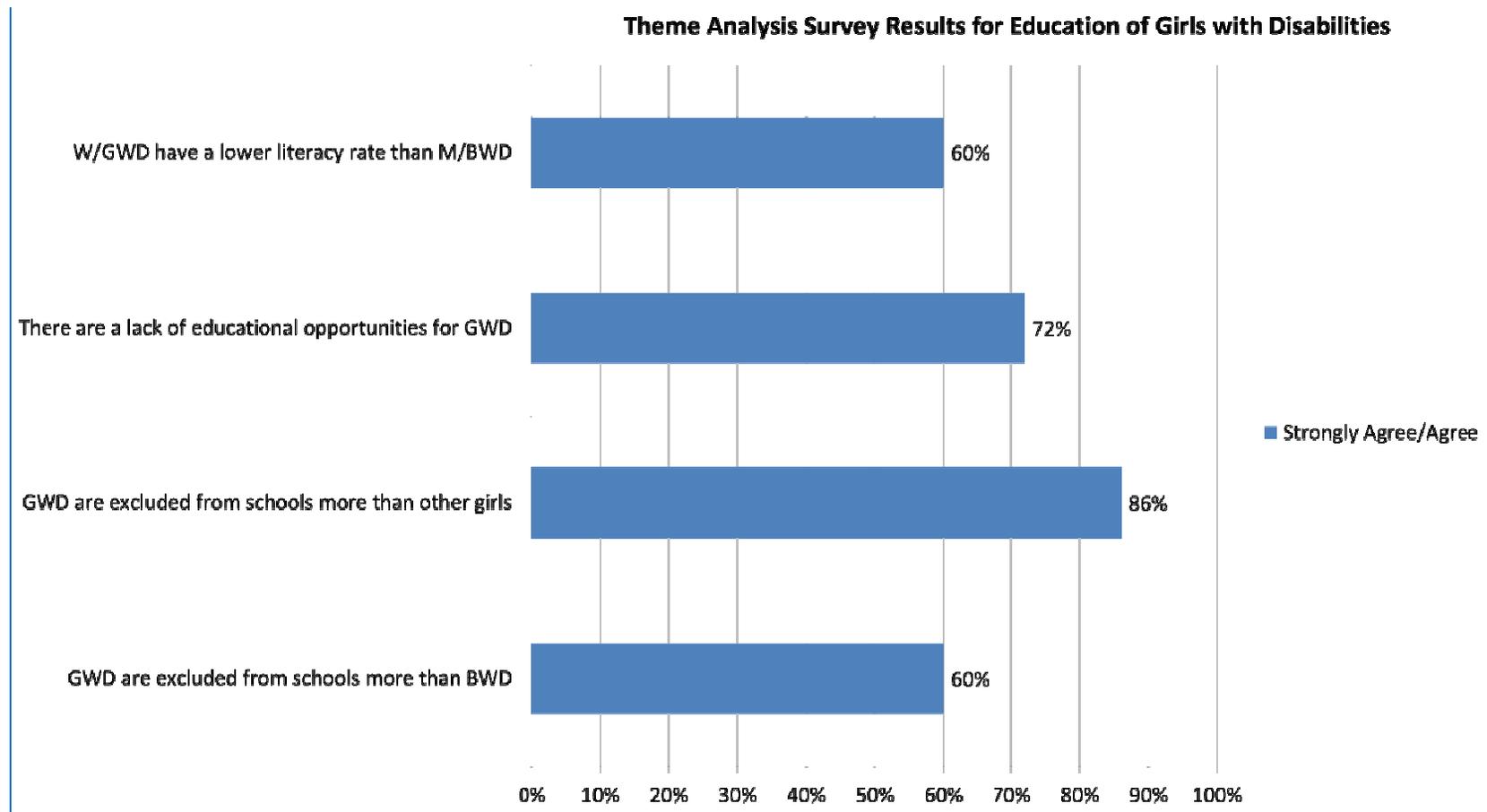


Figure 3: Theme Analysis Results for Education of GWD



Discussion

Education emerged as a multifaceted theme during discussions with the participants. Some key facets were inclusive education, quality of education for children with disabilities, exclusion from school, and preparation for adult life. The importance of quality inclusive education programs for all children with disabilities resonated throughout the interviews. However, many barriers still need to be overcome. These range from inaccessible school buildings to negative attitudes towards inclusion from stakeholders. While transferring a child from a familiar special school to a new inclusive educational setting might be a difficult decision, high quality educational options need to be available for children of all ability levels. Parental reluctance often results from fear due to being previously convinced that their children could only receive services they needed at special schools due to availability in one location of all support services and therapies, teachers specifically trained in disabilities, accommodations of equipment and technology, social acceptance by staff and the friendship of peers with similar abilities. Often these same parents were instrumental in advocating for the creation of special schools for their children when no programs existed. So, reluctance to transfer their children to mainstream inclusive schools is understandable.

The goal of inclusive education is to meet each child at their level and focus instruction and supports so each child reaches their full potential. Successful inclusive education programs however, require adequate funding and highly trained teachers; both of which take time and commitment to establish. Participants from many disparate countries described the benefits of inclusive education in terms of increased awareness and acceptance of disability; greater potential for social inclusion throughout the lifespan; and increased expectations and performance of children with disabilities. This trend toward crossing the threshold of inclusion and implementing inclusive education is illustrative of the changing attitudes toward persons with disabilities and the shift from interpreting the “otherness” of disability as negative, and moving toward an acceptance of difference as a natural part of life. Further, as inclusive education offers a base for full social inclusion, the negative stigma associated with the “otherness” of disability may cease to exist. It is important to recognize and celebrate that disability adds richness to the diversity of life. While the goal of inclusion is equality of opportunity; equality does not mean sameness. Whereas disability may always be perceived as “otherness” by some, as communities around the world cross the threshold of inclusion, the perception of that “otherness” seems to be shifting in a positive direction.

With a few exceptions, the quality and effectiveness of education in higher Human Development Index (HDI) ranked countries is superior to lower HDI ranked countries, making international comparisons of education for children with disabilities complex. If the general population of children is not receiving an adequate education in a particular country, the adequacy of education for vulnerable groups, such as children and particularly girls with disabilities, would be even less adequate. So, children with disabilities in a higher HDI ranked country may receive a more adequate education than a typical child in a lower ranked country. Such comparisons identify international inadequacies and inequalities. The education of every child needs to be held to similar high standards in all area of the world for true equality. As each country improves the educational opportunities for their children, needs of children with disabilities must be proactively addressed to ensure the basic human rights. Participants pointed out during the interviews that education is the key to reaching one's full potential in any country.

Several other themes that emerged during interviews, such as a lack of employment and independent living opportunities for people with disabilities, all have their root in education. It is not enough to simply place a child in a classroom; education ultimately prepares children for adulthood. Some participants described available education as little more than babysitting. Then when school services end, the young person with a disability is often unprepared for adulthood. In fact, 95% of participants responding to the survey agreed that transition services from school to adult life are inadequate, indicating a serious deficiency. Participants consistently described a lack of services for adults with disabilities; where services for children with disabilities were few, services for adults were often nonexistent. The result is that when school services are over; the young adult is often left with no employment options, so they remain isolated at homes with few meaningful activities. Not only is this problematic for the young adult, but it poses new troubles for the parents or caregivers who in many cases must adjust their schedules to look after their adult child full time. Lack of quality educational outcomes serves only to perpetuate the cycle of poverty that describes so many people with disabilities and their families. Poverty all too often is both a cause and consequence of disability. This reality is particularly profound for women and girls with disabilities who are not only routinely denied an education, but are often hidden at home and at much greater risk for abuse and neglect.

It is indeed noteworthy that the majority of the participants interviewed were in agreement identifying similar issues regarding the

education of children with disabilities despite their cultural, financial, and geographic differences. While there are undoubtedly cultural differences in their perception of disability and perhaps of education in general; the overall consensus is that children with disabilities have the right to quality, accessible and inclusive education. This recognition of education as a basic human right makes sharing of information, successful methodologies and resources timely, critical and valuable.

In summary, interviews with people around the world showed consensus in that the quality of education for children with disabilities needs drastic improvement. Educational expectations for children with disabilities need to emphasize success through maximizing on what a child can do rather than what they cannot do. Also, increasing community awareness that children with disabilities can benefit from formal education and in many cases can successfully pursue higher education. Providing quality education to children with disabilities requires that communities across all countries:

- Provide parents with choices regarding the types of quality education they believe is best for their children with disabilities, and
- Recognize the potential of children with disabilities by offering accessible and effective educational options, and encouraging learning opportunities that prepare children with disabilities for independent and productive adult lives in their communities.
- Recognize that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and make appropriate efforts to include them in educational opportunities.

Limitations

The small sample size and use of convenience sampling methods are limitations of this study. While people were sought for interviews from a multitude of international disability organizations as well as representatives of various national Ministries of Health and Education in order to get a wide variety of opinions and expertise, the research was limited by being able to include only those who responded and agreed to participate. The people interviewed represented their own experiences about the education of children with disabilities in their respective countries. Although their experiences are interesting and provide useful insight, they cannot be generalized to other populations.

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Appendix A: List of Countries

Albania	Germany	Palestine
Angola	Ghana	Paraguay
Antigua and Barbuda	Greece	Peru
Argentina	Haiti	Philippines
Armenia	India	Qatar
Australia	Indonesia	Romania
Austria	Iraq	Russia
Bangladesh	Ireland	Saint Lucia
Brazil	Italy	Saudi Arabia
Burundi	Jordan	Senegal
Cambodia	Kenya	Sierra Leone
Cameroon	Kosovo	Slovakia
Canada	Kuwait	Slovenia
China	Lebanon	South Africa
Costa Rica	Macedonia	Spain
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Malawi	Sri Lanka
Denmark	Malaysia	Switzerland
Dominican Republic	Mexico	Thailand
East Timor	Moldova	Tunisia
Egypt	Nepal	Uganda
El Salvador	Netherlands	United Kingdom
Equatorial Guinea	New Zealand	United States of America
Ethiopia	Nicaragua	Uzbekistan
Finland	Nigeria	Yemen
Georgia	Pakistan	Zambia