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Inclusive Practices as Positive Disruptors for Systems Change in Education

Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education

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SPECIAL OLYMPICS GLOBAL CENTER FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

Special Olympics Nigeria athletes play a game of volleyball

About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education serves as a **hub for global thought leadership for inclusive education practices** through research, policy, and programming. Its mission is dedicated to the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in academic, sport, social, and community activities. To help achieve this goal, the Center supports a series of research and policy briefs, as well as case studies, on topics critical to inclusion in education.

FRONT COVER: Special Olympics Paraguay students explore early learning concepts together in an inclusive classroom

About the Authors

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Unified athletes in Kenya take part in an assessment of their football skills

Preface

This brief explores how inclusive practices have been instrumental as positive disruptors of social and academic exclusion of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), thereby creating socially inclusive environments that transform the cultural and educational practices in schools. These inclusive practices provide opportunities for all students to participate in meaningful, high-quality education in their local community, alongside their peers and friends.

What is systems change?

Systems change is the process of modifying or even transforming one or more of the foundational elements that make up a coordinated system, such as its rules, its environment, or the way it functions. The reason for changing a system is to improve its outcomes or address underlying problems. It is a recognition that the current system is not working. To be effective, systems change must be done not superficially, but at a deep and lasting level. Ideally it is broad in scope, taking into account the perspectives of those who will be affected by the change as well as the many facets of a system that interconnect, such as its norms and funding sources.

Within the realm of education, "systems change" means a substantive shift in policy and practice, usually with a goal of enhancing people's learning experiences or increasing their opportunities for access to a service. Systems change is comprehensive; it does not apply to only some people, some grades, or some areas of the curriculum. Everyone sees the need or feels the effect. Sometimes systems change in education may be hastened or supported by advocacy, based on a belief shared with others that there is a better way to do things and that the outcome will be worth the effort. Advocacy around equity prompted governments and community organizations to remove such physical barriers as the lack of curbcuts or ramps at a playground that prevents some individuals from taking advantage of ways to develop new skills and improve their lives. Finally, systems change is often evidence-based. Through data exposing systemic problems and/or through research on existing practices in the field, systems change relies on evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of the new approach that is being proposed and that will disrupt the current way a system operates.

Systems change is typically most effective and most efficient when people at all levels of the system are working in a coordinated fashion toward a common goal. However, since there are many demands on people's time and resources, one level or another may take the lead. A governmental leader or legislative body may set a new standard or enact a new law specifying that students should be taught about an emerging area of science. Consumers who are on the receiving end of an educational service may identify a gap or a problem and initiate their own grassroots movement to lead systems change efforts at a local level.

The risk in starting only at the governmental level or only at the consumer level is that over time the effort may struggle or wither as a result of insufficient support, be that financial, human, or attitudinal. Still, it is important to recognize these unilateral changes as incremental steps on the path to the desired systems change, even though that change may take years or even decades to achieve. A system can begin to change or transform when actors within the system work to positively disrupt how the system currently functions. One particularly effective strategy for influencing more rapid change is **positive disruptive innovation.**

What is disruptive innovation?

The term "disruptive innovation," originally used in industry,[1] was applied to education as early as 2008.[2] Such technological changes as cars, airplanes, computers, television, the internet, cell phones, and online banking and purchasing are among the disruptive innovations that have dramatically changed the world, and new innovations such as artificial intelligence will continue to transform societies. In general, a disruptive innovation creates dramatic changes by replacing an old technology or way of living with an innovation that is more affordable, convenient, rapid, accessible, easy to use, or of higher quality.

Disruptive techonological innovations have had profound economic, social, and political impacts.

Athletes and Unified partners from Special Olympics United Arab Emirates celebrate their team effort

They have the capacity to open new arenas for many in society, changing how people view the world around them and their relationships with others. However, disruptive innovations in the social sphere can influence lives in ways that extend far beyond those reliant on technology. Experience has shown that leveraging disruptive social innovations through positive social activities that have positive impacts can be a highly effective means of initiating or scaling policy change, including in the arena of education.

In education, these innovations usually happen at the grassroots level, disrupting systems as they exist and steering them in a more equitable and inclusive direction. In addition, leveraging positive disruptive innovations at the local level can be a highly effective tool for initiating, supporting, and scaling policy changes at town, state, regional, and national levels. A disruptor broadens opportunities for learners, inserts inclusive practices into otherwise exclusionary spaces, and provides a model for systems transformation.

Over the past few decades, significant changes at the global and national policy levels have supported inclusive education. While these policies and laws can provide for access to education and are formulated based on the concept of inclusion, the actual implementation of inclusion in classrooms and schools has proven to be challenging. Policies are productive for creating the conditions for change, yet they are often insufficient for changing attitudes and practices in the field. This is where positive disruption can play a significant role.

Given the time needed for the progressive realization of the top-down changes often envisioned by policymakers, disruptive innovation at a grassroots level can be highly effective in moving local changes forward. Government-initiated change may be stimulated and advanced when citizens apply pressure for change, and systems themselves can operate differently when community members, parents, and educators support change at a local level. Disruptive innovations can even be contagious, spreading quickly at the grassroots level because people are excited about them and see them as improving their lives and the lives of those around them.

A case in point is the movement to promote socially inclusive educational practices that remove existing barriers and bring individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities into their local education systems and community life. Three examples illustrate innovations in this field. First, through such technologies as **text-to-speech and speech-to-text,** individuals with disabilities have been able to not only access content but demonstrate understanding in new and expansive ways. Second, through the transformational instructional approaches enabled by **universal design for learning,** inclusivity in classrooms has significantly broadened in scope, reaching into instructional design and practice. And third, through disruptive innovations in **inclusive sports,** extracurricular activities, and youth leadership, Special Olympics and its Unified Champion Schools® (UCS) model have been instrumental in bringing inclusive practices to schools and systems around the world. All of these examples represent positive disruptor innovations that operate at the grassroots—in schools and classrooms—as practices that result in learning environments that are more inclusive, in this case of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Why is disruptive innovation so needed at this moment?

Leveraging inclusive practices—both as positive disruptors of exclusion and as promoters of inclusivity—has come to the fore as a critical strategy because of the challenges countries have faced in advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted nearly 18 years ago. To date, many signatories have not been able to meet the commitments they made to enact inclusive policies and implement the corresponding educational practices. Moreover, many nations are falling short of their financial pledges under this international human rights treaty.

In addition to the CRPD, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have issued the call to "leave no one behind."[3] SDG 4 in particular seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education" for all children and youth by 2030.[4] Attainment of SDG 4 was already lagging before the pandemic, but that shortfall increased as countries diverted resources to battle the coronavirus and its aftereffects.[5] According to the results of a UNESCO–UNICEF–World Bank–OECD survey of 143 countries, lower-income countries face particular challenges in providing educational access for vulnerable populations, in part because of a lack of coherent policies and funding to bolster digital learning, distance learning, and teacher support.[6]

A major remaining barrier is the absence of laws and sustainable policies supporting inclusive practices in education. Only about 40 percent of low- and middle-income countries appropriate funds specifically for the education of children with disabilities.[7] National surveys from 43 low- and middle-income countries found that children with disabilities are 49% more likely to have never attended school compared to children without disabilities. Among children with disabilities, certain groups face even higher rates of exclusion: across these 43 national surveys, 70% or more of children who are deaf, blind, or have severe intellectual disability are not in school.[8] Girls with disabilities, and children with disabilities who face other forms of overlapping marginalization—such as being ethnically or racially minoritized, experience additional barriers to inclusion.

While the numerous challenges of implementing inclusive education are readily acknowledged, the consequences of countries' delay or inaction on behalf of youth are stark. Worldwide, nearly 240 million young people under the age of 18 live with one or more disabilities. Those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are particularly susceptible to being bullied, ostracized, and excluded from everyday activities in the community.

To overcome these challenges, governments need to increase investments in inclusive practices, and schools need to adopt evidence-based inclusive practices. Yet, many countries are stymied in their efforts by the need to enhance teacher training, pursue rigorous evaluation of school culture and climate, provide resources that address the needs of diverse communities, and offer organizational leadership on a national scale.

In far too many places an entire generation has grown up since the adoption of the CRPD, and they are still waiting for laws, policies, and funding formulas to acknowledge the importance of including all students in educational opportunities. Advocacy is important, laws are critical, and funding is needed, but systems can begin to change now through positive disruptive innovations carried out at local and national levels.

How are inclusive practices a positive disruptor to education systems?

In most countries throughout the world, education systems were not originally built or designed to be welcoming, empowering, or accommodating to children with disabilities. Sadly, many of those systems are still in place today.

Supported by policies and often unquestioned assumptions, schools are usually set up as competitive environments, rewarding a small number of children for attaining high marks or athletic prowess. While children with disabilities are occasionally among those who receive such accolades, more often they reside in lower positions in the schools' hierarchies or the margins of its core community. Some of these children experience social isolation,[9] and in some places the capacities of children with disabilities are underestimated by narrowly defined assessments.[10] Inflexible standards, valorization of high-stakes competition, and under-resourced schools all create environments in which children with disabilities are under-valued, invisible, or stigmatized in schools.[11] Although globally many interested parties agree that changes are needed,[12] exclusion still exists as the norm.

One way to address this exclusion is to challenge, or disrupt, business as usual. In most schools globally, children with disabilities rarely interact with children who do not have disability labels. Adhering to an exclusionary paradigm, sports in schools usually have only one avenue for participation—that which admits the most skilled and competitive athletes in a particular sport. Research on engagement in sports activity by children with disabilities has highlighted that gaining entry to play, feeling like a legitimate participant, and having friends[13] are typically the outcomes most desired by these athletes.

A student in Paraguay ponders the results of spinning the wheel in a Unified Champion Schools activity

Building on the framework of disruptive actions, the best way to disrupt segregated activities is to have children play, exercise, and participate together. The best way for all children to participate is to disrupt systems that do not allow for such participation. The best way to support friendships among children with and without disabilities is to directly address social aspects of schooling that facilitate friendships and challenge those that separate learners.[14]

In general, scholars have expressed concerns that education and schooling may never be inclusive until education systems decouple themselves from their zero-sum resource orientation and from the market-based and dehumanizing foundations on which they were established.[15] However, positive disruptors such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text technology, universal design for learning, and inclusive sports can work within systems to begin to facilitate inclusivity. In this way, education systems can gradually become more egalitarian, equitable, and inclusive simply by intentionally engaging in everyday actions that model egalitarianism, equity, and inclusion. Positive disruptors occur from within when agents of change create inclusion in spaces that are otherwise exclusionary. A disruptor has the power to set new energy in motion, re-establish linkages, and create new possibilities.

How can advocates of inclusion leverage disruptive innovation to scale inclusive educational practices?

As school systems across the world wrestle with persistent inequities in students' opportunities and outcomes, the issue of inclusion stands out as one of the greatest challenges in education.[16] At the same time, across these contexts, inclusion also stands out as a promising way to provide a chance for all students to enjoy meaningful, high-quality education in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.

The barriers to inclusive education are well understood and include inadequacies in policy and legal support, resources and facilities, teacher training and specialized staff, inclusive pedagogy and curricula, supportive leadership, and cultural attitudes.[17] However, current thinking suggests that:

> **Rather than relying solely on top-down policy action to remove barriers, it is useful to think about ways in which positive disruptive innovation—that is, successful inclusive practices—can be employed to drive change at a systems level from the inside outward and from the bottom up.**

To be clear, policy-based commitment and action are essential—policy creates the conditions for best practices to flourish. However, inclusive practices can themselves be effectively leveraged as disruptors and catalysts to promote system change.

While policy-level actors in education systems across the world may now be exploring how policy can be used to advance inclusive systems,[18] another group of people are acting on inclusion without waiting for systems to transform. By doing so, inclusive activists are transforming systems as they go and are changing how systems operate. In addition to being bottom-up, this work spreads laterally among organizations and locales and takes effect from the inside out.

Inclusive programs and practices can be disruptively powerful levers for broadscale systemic change. When inclusive practices are implemented and supported by learning communities, they interrupt existing practices, which in turn creates space for rethinking what could be possible. Inclusive action can lead to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, draws attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning by individuals with disabilities. In this way, inclusive actions become a catalyst for improvement at the classroom, school, and system levels.

Children with disabilities, as well as educational institutions, cannot afford to wait additional years for policy initiatives to transform systems. Exclusion can be disrupted now and inclusivity can be recognized as an achievable end goal for the near future. Through positive disruptive innovation by actors in the field, systems can be transformed through the very process of these actors *doing* inclusion.[19]

Several innovative disruptors that promote inclusive education are already in use in a number of schools across the world. Following are three examples of inclusive practices that are having a profound impact on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Example 1: Text-to-Speech and Speech-to-Text

Text-to-speech (TTS) and speech-to-text (STT) are mirrored forms of a type of assistive technology. Assistive technology has been described as devices and services that enhance abilities and reduce barriers to achievement.[20] The use of assistive technology can extend across disability groups, settings, and tasks.[21]

Bell Labs created the first speech synthesis systems in the 1950s. In 1976, Kurzweil introduced Reading Machines for the Blind, using TTS innovations to allow people with visual impairments to listen to books. Eventually, commercial applications spread from video games to personal computer products, making the technology ubiquitous and part of daily life.[22]

The positive disruption of TTS was embedded in its enormous innovation of moving from the use of print as the sole means of conveying text-based information to the option of digital text, which allowed content to either be listened to or simultaneously heard and read. This technology, so transformative in giving students with disabilities the capacity to engage in learning tasks, also pushed policy forward. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—first enacted in 1975—required that school districts ensure the provision of assistive technology to students who needed it.[23,24,25]

More specifically, IDEA required that schools make available digital formats of class materials such as textbooks. When classrooms used only print, many students with print disabilities (such as students with dyslexia or IDD or without the capacity to manipulate print) were left out of independent engagement with the curriculum. It was the innovative tool of TTS, coupled with IDEA's policy requirement that school districts provide digital formats to students who needed them, that both disrupted and eventually vastly improved the publishing industry, making standard curriculum available to students with disabilities—many for the first time. Organizations such as CAST (formerly the Center for Applied Special Technology) worked with publishers and education technology vendors to ensure they created accessible digital formats of education materials, including textbooks and education software used in classrooms.

Speech to Text (STT) is the opposite process of TTS, transcribing spoken words into text. STT enables transcriptions from audio recordings, allows for voice commands and voice dictation, and facilitates real-time captioning for accessibility. Speech recognition technology fundamentally changes how people with disabilities can consume information in real time and express what they know.

As disruptive innovations, TTS and STT remove barriers to participation that may arise from inaccessible forms of communication. They also promote the recognition of inclusion as a viable avenue for instruction and promote inclusion as a valued part of the educator's belief system. Today, assistive technologies are common across learning environments and many other daily settings where people interact with information, from reading transcribed voicemails on cell phones to speaking directions to a virtual assistant. Disruptive innovations that were initially conceived as being vital for the welfare of some individuals have over time improved the lives of the majority.

Example 2: Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) responds to the realization that the barriers to including students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom are embedded in the design of the curricula and learning environments, not in the learners themselves.[26,27] UDL is a framework for reducing those barriers and for intentionally designing educational experiences with learner variability in mind.

The UDL approach emanated from the establishment of the CAST organization in 1984. Echoing the concept of universal design in architecture and product development, which aims to make spaces and information more accessible to individuals with disabilities,[28] UDL is an evidence-based framework that draws from the learning sciences and research-based instructional methods to design for the widest range of learners from the outset. UDL implementers have learned that what is essential for some, benefits all.[29]

The UDL framework offers concrete approaches for designing learning environments and learning experiences that are flexible, customizable, and accessible to all learners. UDL is grounded in three core principles:[30,31,32]

1. Students need to be personally engaged in the "why" of learning through multiple approaches to participation that celebrate diverse neurology, culture, personal relevance, subjectivity, background knowledge, and more.
2. Students need to be exposed to the "what" of learning by means of information that is represented through multiple methods that cater to differences in how learners absorb and process new material.
3. Students need the freedom to demonstrate "how" they will express their learning by choosing among multiple means of action based on personal preference and talent.

UDL started with a small group of neuroscientists and learning designers working directly with children with disabilities who were excluded from fully participating in school because of barriers in the instructional design. Spreading not because of policy but because of grassroots enthusiasm for its results, today the UDL framework is used in schools globally and influences learning environments beyond the K-12 classroom, including programs that serve students with IDD. It has served to disrupt long-held understandings of what "teaching" and "learning" mean within the classroom environment.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promotes UDL as a strategy for shifting toward a more learner-centered education system.[33] UDL is included in guidance for education inclusion in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,[34] USAID's guidance on accessible materials and literacy toolkit,[35] and UNESCO's Guidelines on the Inclusion of Learners with Disabilities in Open and Distance Learning.[36]

UDL's effectiveness as an innovation for disruption is noticeable not only in the way it changes classroom interactions; its positive impact also reveals itself in the outcomes it produces for all learners, teachers, and communities alike. The newly released UDL Guidelines 3.0 improves on earlier iterations by addressing barriers rooted in biases and systems of exclusion.[37] By enabling more students to engage in learning environments and demonstrate what they know and can do, and by equipping educators with the skills to eliminate barriers to learning, UDL contributes to a more expansive view of human intelligence, which is critical to the inclusion and acceptance of people with IDD throughout society.

Special Olympics Pakistan participants listen intently to a presentation about the role of young people in spreading inclusive practices

Example 3: Inclusive Sports

Another prime example of a positive disruptor is the way Special Olympics has highlighted the capabilities of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and by doing so has dramatically changed public attitudes towards them. Once almost completely excluded from society, the simple and inexpensive innovation of involving individuals with IDD in sport helped to open additional opportunities for them in education, work, and the social life of the community. Originating in the 1960s as an outgrowth of Eunice Kennedy Shriver's compassion and insight, Special Olympics is now a worldwide movement for the inclusion of individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities, engaging millions of individuals with and without disabilities. Shriver founded Special Olympics at a grassroots level long before inclusion was governmental policy in the United States. Its contagious effect caused government to grasp its importance and to shift its policies regarding individuals with IDD in a different direction.

Special Olympics, in fact, became a catalyst for providing individuals with disabilities access to education. In the United States, Special Olympics joined with special education policy advocates and changed attitudes to such a degree that the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) and has continued to pass updates. The legislation set policies and laws in motion in the United States to provide access to education for children with disabilities. Worldwide, based in part on the inspiration and insight provided by Special Olympics, multiple countries have enacted similar laws and policies.

Special Olympics began as (and continues to be) an opportunity for individuals with IDD to have their own athletic outlets and competitions. The organization, however, has increasingly moved into other inclusive practices in order to disrupt the stigma, exclusion, and discrimination that students with IDD encounter in school environments.

One innovation in particular that has proven to be instrumental in bringing inclusive practices to scale in schools across the globe is the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) model.[38] This model can operate at the ground level to support communities that are interested in inclusive practices, regardless of whether their country has or has not enacted inclusive policies or made commitments to the CRPD and to SDG 4. (See Box 1.)

Unified students in Dubai participate in the UAE Games 2024

Box 1. A Closer Look at One Positive Disruptor

The **Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) model** incorporates three major components aimed at disrupting the exclusion and stigmatization of learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities—Special Olympics Unified Sports®, whole-school engagement, and youth leadership.

The first component, **Unified Sports,** provides recreational, player development, and competitive sporting activities. The term "Unified" emphasizes the guiding principle that children and youth with and without disabilities are engaged in the activities together, with the goal of fostering positive relationships and social interaction. By playing together on teams, they are working hand-in-hand toward greater respect and dignity for people with intellectual disabilities. Through Unified Sports, youth may play on Unified Sports teams that compete in their local area, attend Unified physical education or fitness classes, participate in eSports or fitness activities, or engage in developmental sports. These sport-related activities often serve to start individuals of all ages on the path to forming their own inclusive mindset.

The second component, **whole-school engagement,** challenges the marginalization of children with disabilities by developing Unified extracurricular activities and hosting rallies, assemblies, and forums that engage the entire staff and student body in encouraging a culture of inclusion. In addition, its "Spread the Word" campaign seeks to eliminate the use of the R-word* and its stigmatizing effects.[39] Whole-school engagement aims to increase the visibility of learners with disabilities through Unified Sports pep rallies, schoolwide sports days/festivals, and Special Olympics performances, and by establishing Unified fitness challenges for all students in the school.

The third component, **inclusive youth leadership,** provides structured ways for youth with disabilities to experience leadership opportunities and become social leaders in their schools. This development occurs through Unified clubs, which are friendship-focused clubs that explicitly engage students with and without IDD. Special Olympics offers club members and other students inclusive leadership training that develops their capabilities and self-confidence. Students are also invited to volunteer for other Special Olympics events that may take place in system-spanning Special Olympics Youth Summits. The UCS model supports Youth Activation Committees at the national, local, and school levels. Where Unified clubs focus on building friendships among youth with and without disabilities, Activation Committees foster collective outreach and engagement of committee members (with and without disabilities) with other students in their schools to directly advance the inclusion movement.[40]

In effect, the Unified Champion Schools model promotes the strategic implementation of three distinct inclusive practices, each of which is a positive disruptive innovation.

** The "R-word" is a six-letter derogatory term that has been used to describe persons with intellectual or developmental disability. The term is stigmatizing and was derived from early medical framing of IDD. Organizations such as Special Olympics, TASH, the ARC, and others have sought to eradicate its usage.*

How have UCS programs impacted the inclusive culture in schools?

A positive disruptive innovation, then, can be seen as any practice that serves as a catalyst or lever for a favorable change. For the purposes of this brief, the desired change or outcome is to close the inclusive education policy-to-practice gap in countries where policies exist and to initiate opportunities for inclusive participation and engagement for students with IDD. In countries where inclusive policies for education exist but are not as encompassing as they could be or are not being fully implemented, the disruptor serves as a lever that may result in, accelerate, or broaden a policy change. This is what happened in the United Arab Emirates. (See Box 2.)

Box 2. The UAE Promotes Inclusion on a National Scale Through Sport

In 2006, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) passed its first Federal Law (No. 29) "Concerning the Rights of Persons with Special Needs." Building upon this key recognition, Emirate-level policies and strategies were initiated in the early 2010s, applicable to both public and private schools. In the mid-2010s, the UAE took another important step, initiating federal policies and frameworks related to inclusive education. In 2016, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum introduced the term "people of determination" to replace "special needs" in federal law, thereby sparking a cultural shift in how persons with intellectual disabilities were viewed and understood in the country.

Policy initiatives in the UAE continued throughout the 2010s, and progress toward inclusive education was further supported when the UAE was chosen to host the Special Olympics World Games 2019 in its capital city of Abu Dhabi. At these Games, the UAE's leaders witnessed Unified Sports in action. They saw more than 7,000 athletes with and without disabilities from over 200 nations competing in 24 sports. They saw them competing on the same teams, celebrating wins and accepting losses with equal pride in their collective effort. They saw what inclusion could mean to their citizens and their country.

In effect, the World Games served as an accelerator, amplifying cultural and systemic shifts toward the inclusion of people of determination. An advocate present at the event noted that the Games created a "buzz" throughout the Emirates, riding the momentum of a decade of policy shifts while introducing sport as a new avenue for promoting inclusivity in schools and in society.

In the case of the UAE, a long and planned transition to inclusion was already underway and taking shape, both legally and culturally. But the massive and highly visible opportunities embodied by the World Games Abu Dhabi injected the new element of inclusive sport into the national narrative. As a positive accelerator, the Games proclaimed the feasibility and importance of inclusion in education and in all aspects of community life, generating hope and excitement among families, citizens, and leaders of the UAE—and especially among people of determination themselves.

Research on the UCS model reveals that it functions as a positive disruptor to the norm of exclusion. According to program evaluations of Special Olympics partner schools, Unified Sports is the most commonly implemented component (found in approximately 80–90% of schools), followed by whole-school engagement (70–90% of schools), and inclusive youth leadership (60–80% of schools).[41,42,43] These program evaluations have found that, in general, the inclusive impact of UCS is greater when all three components are present, and this impact increases over time; that is, the longer schools engage in UCS, the greater the overall impact on the schools' educational culture.[44,45,46] In addition, the UCS model continues to grow a cadre of youth leaders who have learned effective ways to challenge the status quo and who are now encouraging adults to join them in supporting policies that will ensure long-term sustainability of inclusion.[47] (See Box 3.)

Box 3. Paraguay Unites Practice and Policy to Further Inclusion

In Latin America, the UCS model was first introduced in 2020 in Argentina. Over the next few years, as more teachers and coaches became involved in implementing a Unified approach both inside and outside sports spaces, news of the UCS model's inclusive impact began to spread to neighboring countries, prompting families in those locales to seek the same opportunities for their children.

One of these countries, Paraguay, stands out as a place where Unified Champion Schools' inclusive practices are transforming the way schools deliver education. Special Olympics Latin America had already established positive relationships with Paraguay and recognized the country's strong internal leadership. In 2023, Special Olympics Latin America invited Paraguay to join the UCS movement.

To a large degree, Paraguay was chosen because the populace demonstrated an eagerness to change—a grassroots readiness and advocacy to do something different that promised better results for their children. Paraguay's teachers were also receptive to reframing their perspective and adapting their instruction so that all students could actively participate. They understood that diversity is a strength, not an obstacle. As a result, in just two years the UCS model has been implemented in 196 schools in Paraguay; over 1,000 teachers have been trained and more than 15,000 students with and without IDD participate in Unified Sports.

Perhaps of greatest importance to this effort, thanks to UCS student leadership training young people in Paraguay not only participate in but also promote an inclusive culture. The youth leaders have themselves become "positive disruptors" of the existing system of education by acting as agents of change through their roles as Unified partners or volunteers in sporting events.

With the youth leaders playing a key role, UCS serves as a positive disruptor by breaking down traditional barriers and promoting interactions among people of different backgrounds and abilities, leading to more open and inclusive mindsets. The effectiveness of the UCS model is driving demand to expand the model even further throughout the country.

Meanwhile, as change was afoot at the local level, official action also got underway. Ever since the UCS program was launched in Latin America in 2020, officials from multiple governments had watched its growing operation and impact. Influenced by the success they observed in the local implementation of UCS, Paraguay's Ministry of Education and Science, the National Sports Secretariat, the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare, and regional governments began to introduce inclusive policies into their agendas.

One outcome was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Special Olympics Paraguay and the Ministry of Education and Science. This policy-level commitment demonstrates the power that a disruptive innovation at the local level can have.

Paraguay's citizens now lean on this national signing as formal support for encouraging their own community organizations to increase inclusive practices. These local and national alliances have spawned a network of more than 350 education-related institutions that are supporting the UCS model in 17 regions of Paraguay. Unified Champion Schools in Paraguay is not just a project; it is a movement—a disruptive innovation that is breaking down barriers and fostering inclusion to propel all of society forward.

Students who participate in UCS activities have reported they feel more supported by their teachers and peers, have higher levels of grit, receive better grades, and are more empathetic and compassionate than nonparticipants. And perhaps the most compelling fact is that these findings apply to typically developing students as well as to those with disabilities.[48,49,50]

The research evidence provides important insights into how exclusionary systems, as they currently exist, are disrupted by UCS programming. Students with disabilities who participate in sports or other extracurricular activities are less likely to be bullied.[51] Providing structured, supportive extracurricular opportunities appears to be a way to break the cycle, thus promoting a more generative form of inclusion than simply having children learning in the same classes together. UCS evaluations have found this kind of cross-ability engagement often leads to friendships among learners with and without disabilities, thus contributing to an overall shift in school culture.[52,53,54]

Positive disruptions also can impact how people operate within systems, thus affecting the trajectories of the systems themselves. Programming that brings youth with and without disabilities together has been associated with greater perspective-taking and respect among students who participate,[55] including such culture-shifting actions as effective teamwork among students and celebrating the achievements of others.[56] As one study reported with regard to inclusive sports, "For some students, it could change their entire outlook about school and their own identities, enhancing feelings of acceptance and belonging."[57] (See Box 4.)

Additional impacts or ripple effects include a link between UCS participation and higher standardized test score outcomes,[58] school staff perceptions that disciplinary referrals decrease when UCS programming is present,[59] increased motivation for students to attend school in order to participate in programming,[60] and expanded understanding of inclusion even among students who do not participate in programming in their schools.[61] Special Olympics is one of only a few organizations worldwide that have directly addressed the use of the R-word in schools.[62] The cultural connotations of the specific use of the R-word are more relevant for the Western world and English-speaking populations; however, studies have shown that pejorative terminology and attitudes toward persons with disabilities are worldwide phenomena.[63,64,65,66,67]

Special Olympics Fiji uses a relaxing art activity to promote inclusion in its Unified Champion Schools

Box 4. Kenya Promotes Inclusion by Coordinating Engagement at Multiple Levels

Among the 48 Sub-Saharan countries, 42% are considered to be pursuing education policies that support the inclusion of children with disabilities. Despite these policies, evidence shows that children with disabilities are less likely to attend school—or to complete school if they do enroll.[68] Aware of this gap, governments embrace partnerships with organizations such as Special Olympics that can accelerate change.

One such government is Kenya. The Special Olympics Kenya Program was founded in 1978, focusing its sports engagement efforts on special schools only. The Program established a formal partnership with the Kenya Ministry of Education in 2007 and, in 2009, introduced Unified Sports in a few mainstream schools. The implementation of Unified Sports stirred educators and families alike to see new possibilities for inclusive practices. This form of positive disruption proved to be highly effective, encouraging the Ministry to support the Program's expansion to other schools throughout the country.

In 2024, Special Olympics approached Kenya about expanding its inclusive activities beyond sports through the more comprehensive UCS model. Kenya accepted, participated in training, and is now implementing the UCS model in 21 counties, bringing the benefits of inclusion to 25,246 students with and without IDD in 272 schools under the guidance of 2,142 teachers.

While Special Olympics Kenya and local schools take the lead on the implementation of UCS, the direction and extent of the expansion are initiated at multiple levels. Because the constitution of Kenya requires regional balance for all initiatives, the ministry recommends which regions should be next in line to implement UCS. At the grassroots level, local curriculum officers collaborate with school principals to identify the individual schools that will introduce the UCS model. In some instances, having learned of the model's impact in other counties, the school principals themselves request that their schools be selected for the project.

Research in Kenya reveals the positive impact of UCS in those schools. Among students without IDD, 69% reported being comfortable in the same class with peers with IDD. Among students with and without IDD, 100% reported they had formed friendships with their counterparts and had increased confidence in their own ability to interact. Among the teachers, 73% reported they had become aware of the contributions of students with IDD in the school setting. Among administrators, 62% observed that students with and without IDD were comfortable collaborating on school projects. And among parents, 67% reported seeing increased interactions between children with and without IDD, while 64.4% saw a reduction in bullying.[69]

Konjora Primary School is one of the hundreds of sites in Kenya that is implementing UCS. Mr. Nicholas Kai is the teacher with primary responsibility for overseeing the services and activities that are provided to students with IDD. He says:

> **Since UCS, labeling, teasing and use of derogatory terms have stopped. The shared experiences through the three components of UCS have eliminated stigma. Teachers and students have become proactive changemakers. This has had a ripple effect on the community. Families are bringing out previously hidden children with ID and enrolling them in school, giving them a chance to enjoy their right to education.**

By joining hands and respecting each other's responsibilities, local and national groups are deepening the impact of inclusion and leading all of Kenya to celebrate the spread of UCS as a positive disruptor.

Unified students in Dubai participate in the UAE Games 2024

What can be learned from the positive disruptive influence of the UCS model?

Special Olympics and its UCS model stand out as a prime example of the positively-disrupting-systems-through-inclusion approach to education. Partnerships among policymakers, nongovernmental organizations, governmental substructures, and families have extended and expanded upon the initial impact of the UCS model's disruptive innovation in inclusivity.

At this point, three important lessons are evident from Special Olympics' implementation of UCS as a positive disruptor in support of inclusive education:

1. **Inclusion does not happen on its own.** "Simply placing students with extensive support needs in general education settings does not constitute inclusion, nor does this necessarily result in positive outcomes for students."[70] Special Olympics programs provide specific, structured activities for students and specific, structured instructions for school leaders on how to promote inclusivity. Historically, systems have been set up to leave educators and other interested parties without much experience or practice on how to effectively include. While contextually-driven approaches undoubtedly inform practice worldwide, often a first step of inclusion is for systems actors to have access to information on the "how" and "why" of inclusion. Inclusive programming provides this framework.

2. **Education extends beyond subject-matter learning**. While UCS programming is linked to academic gains, its most significant impact on education systems is likely in fostering a positive climate that supports the development of life skills that contribute to further education and employability.[71,72] By utilizing a variety of Unified approaches to facilitate inclusion, UCS programming helps create safe learning environments that use shared experiences among all students to build friendships where the focus is on commonalities, not difference and division.[73] Shifting the purpose of education to focus on preparing children with the skills and values necessary for successful participation in life and the workforce may be one of the most transformative changes in education systems in the 21st century.[74,75,76] Integrating these objectives into programming sets lasting change in motion.

3. **Inclusion is not an endpoint; rather, it is an ongoing process.** It is by continually working through this process that transformation takes place and that people, settings, systems, and experiences have the possibility of becoming ever more inclusive in ways not yet imagined.

Concluding Thoughts

Self-advocates, allies, and advocates for learners with IDD have long sought to transform education systems that were not built for children with disabilities. Systems transformation through such positive disruptive innovations as the Unified Champion Schools model, universal design for learning, and technologies such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text present opportunities for grassroots individuals to bring inclusion to scale.

A positive disruptor approach to systems change is a continual and ongoing process. While global, national, and local convenings are important to align education systems with the values, purposes, and access that can create a more inclusive future, positive disruptions introduce inclusivity into systems, potentially creating new ways of doing education, new cultural practices suppporting education, and new ways of understanding what—and who—education is for. Systems, in this case, are intended to evolve and transform continuously, not to slowly build energy toward an envisioned, larger-scale, future transformation.[77]

Inclusive programming represents a positive disruptor to education systems that have long under-served children with intellectual disabilities. Although on the surface these programs may seem like "just" (only) sporting or extracurricular programs, in practice they are "just" (justice-oriented) disruptors of systems education stasis. Globalization, colonization, and under-resourcing of education worldwide have led to conditions that leave students with IDD either invisible in their communities and not attending school at all, or stigmatized when they do.[78]

Inclusive programming and the creation of inclusive cultures in education can disrupt these patterns. Injections of inclusion into otherwise exclusionary or ableist systems[79,80] can work as an antidote to exclusion. "Doing inclusion" can produce evidence about how an intentional focus on inclusion has social and academic impacts for all learners. It can provide models for practice, and it can provide structured ways to support engagement among students who previously did not engage with one another. Unified Sports, UDL, and assistive technologies are not the only ways to disrupt exclusion in education systems, but they do provide important lessons for policymakers and leaders at all levels of systems.

Inclusion is an action that can influence the cultural processes of education and how its stakeholders go about their work. Inclusion-oriented approaches are not simply helping children who have disabilities; they are recreating how systems work. An action-oriented approach gives educators, parents, students, and community members more agency to do something now rather than hope and wait for all the pieces to come together in some undetermined future.

Systems change occurs through daily acts of transformation, intentional disruptions to the status quo, and a commitment to immediate action. Systems will not be transformed through the actions of one organization, several like-minded ministers of education, or an international global governance organization. Transformation takes time and the combined political will of many individual actors, organizations, and advocates. However, transformation can begin by injecting inclusion, disrupting exclusion, and learning new ways of educating all children and youth for a more inclusive tomorrow.

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Students from Unified Champion Schools in Paraguay sign their commitment to Spread the Word

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