

## **UNESCO - United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**

### **Accommodations in education**

#### **Overview**

While education is recognized as a universal right by international organizations, that right is still excluded from some people in different regions of the world due to reasons such as gender, sexual orientation, religion and ability. The lack of educational inclusivity is also present in the West, especially due to ability. For instance, students suffering from autism are more likely to be suspended or expelled from their schools than other students. Even though policies have been put in place internationally, this problem is still very present and can create negative consequences on the individuals affected, considering their mental and emotional well-being, and the society as a whole, affecting aspects such as the literacy rate. This background guide will focus on educational inclusivity in terms of access to education tailored to the needs of children from different backgrounds within a country.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO), established in 1945, aims to strengthen the world by promoting education, science, culture and communication. UNESCO is known as the "Laboratory of Ideas" in the United Nations, since it allows people from different domains to come together and discuss ideas of global scale. This organization, with 194 member states, creates a forum of discussion between states, allowing cooperation between them and creating a global network to promote global peace, cultural heritage and positive change. In regards to education, whether it is regarding inclusion or the advances of artificial intelligence, UNESCO uses the tools at their disposal to help the world through our next generation.

## Past conventions

The past conventions relating to accommodations in education are crucial in understanding the history of education as a universal right. In fact, the *Convention against Discrimination in Education*, adopted in 1960 in Paris, was “First legally binding international instrument which is entirely dedicated to the right to education”(4). It was put into force in 1962, and has 110 ratified states for the convention today, including France, Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, the United States and Canada are not part of these states. The United States has not ratified the convention, like many other conventions and treaties, due to a fear of losing some of their national sovereignty and governing authority. However, Canada is not a signatory of this convention, because its domestic laws prohibit educational discrimination. This convention introduces important points that define how we view the right to education today. For instance, it guarantees free and compulsory primary education, and generally available and accessible secondary education in different forms. Additionally, it prohibits discrimination in all forms of education. This is the basis for the *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework of Action*, established in 2015, which provides a road map to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities to all”(9).

The following important convention is the Convention on Technical and Vocational Education, adopted in 1989 in Paris, and put into force in 1991. This convention defines technical and vocational education as “all forms and levels of the educational process involving, in addition to general knowledge, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, know-how, attitudes and understanding relating to occupations in the various sectors of economic and social life”(7). Its main message is to promote access to

vocational and technical education and support training programs for diverse learning needs.

That being said, this convention has very few signatories.

Lastly, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was adopted in 2005 in Paris, and put into force in 2007. It affirms the importance of cultural diversity as “a defining characteristic of humanity”(8). In many countries, exclusion in education often comes from unequal treatment of different cultures within one people. Therefore, affirming the importance of cultural diversity encourages nation-wide equality in many sectors, including that of education. Additionally, it encourages states to offer equal access to cultural education, creative activities and education that better reflects diverse cultural identities.

### **The problem persists**

While there have been impressive strides in the past decades relating to education, there is still much room for improvement. In fact, a lack of educational inclusivity exists in Eurasia. For instance, a UNESCO report covered 30 education systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. It showed that there is still educational exclusion for children with disabilities or those of ethnic minorities. Evidently, there is progress in these countries, considering the drop of children with disabilities in special schools from 78% in 2006 to 53% in 2016, but 53% is still a considerable proportion of the population. Crucially, 22 countries institute separate schools for linguistic and ethnic minorities today. While this stems from a desire to provide education in the students' first languages, minority populations have a more narrow range of subjects to learn from, creating discrepancies between different groups within the nation in question.

Interestingly enough, a study in Hong Kong(11) observed the learning experiences of ethnic minority students within their nation. In the study, teachers used the tools familiar to these students instead of the monolingual use of Chinese that teachers usually use, which brought issues of diversity, social inequalities and racial discrimination to light. In fact, this study challenges the prevailing idea in Hong Kong that these minority students are not doing as well in school because of their background, and brings forth the notion that their educational challenges are a societal issue. Hong Kong exemplifies a global pattern of deficit thinking, in which nations have low academic expectations for certain group due to what is believed to be an inherent cultural deficit. However, this study disputes the global deficit argument by showing that academic struggles are due to inequalities within a nation.

It is worth noting that educational exclusivity does not only exist in Eurasia, but is also a concern in the Western World. For instance, there is evidence of disparities in the United States educational system on the basis of race. In fact, in 2014, when comparing white and black students, the National Center for Education Statistics states that “the high school graduation rate for white students was 87 percent[...] For black students, the rate was 73 percent”(12). Evidently, there has been significant improvement in inclusive education for black students in the past century. In the 1950s, educational exclusivity of black students was explicit through segregation in all sectors including schools. While the situation has greatly improved, the reason behind this persisting discrepancy is the implicit differences in treatments of black and white students by schools. For example, teachers are less likely to identify black students who excel. In fact, black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled and less likely to be put in gifted programs.

What makes this exclusivity difficult to resolve in the United States is that these differences may be due to implicit biases within the nation.

An interesting study that reinforces these inequalities indicated that black students are two times more likely to be suspended than white students. Additionally, low income students are 1.75 times more likely to be suspended than higher income students. In other words, educational inclusivity has room for improvement throughout the world.

### **What comes next**

Evidently, educational inclusivity is important for individuals within a nation. However, there has been evidence pointing to the notion that it can also serve as a means of promoting societal change. For example, improvements in education in Saudi Arabia may serve a step away from antisemitism and peace in the Middle East. Between 2017 and 2020, Saudi Arabia's Education Ministry made multiple changes to their textbooks to eliminate hate-speech against other religions and ethnic groups, including Jews, Christians and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This represents strides toward equality within the country, but it can also serve an international purpose, considering that an Israeli organization, IMPACT-se, viewed these changes as an improvement and development for Saudi Arabia. However, these reforms are quite recent, meaning their long-term impact is yet to be seen.

It is worth noting that educational exclusivity, while reduced, persists in Saudi Arabia. While hateful references to other groups were eliminated, along with most explicit targeted references toward Shia Islam, implicit references remain. Hence, a discriminatory world view still exists in the Saudi Arabian educational system.

To conclude, most nations understand the concept of free, accessible education for all in theory. However, the delivery of said education, and the acknowledgement of equal education in practice, varies between countries. Evidently, some countries are more inclusive than others. However, it is important to know that educational inclusivity is an important topic in national and international talks, as a means of improving a nation on an individual and societal scale.

Some important questions for the delegates to ask include the following. Why did the United States and Canada not sign the Convention Against Discrimination in Education? Is increasing inclusivity in education a causal factor in societal equality or a consequence of it? Finally, are some countries influenced by other, more powerful countries to preserve the exclusivity of their educational system? If so, why?

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