



'Stories for Inclusion'

Learning Brief

Key Learning Points:

- Early disability awareness and response – using a community approach - is key to secure the best possible future of a child with disabilities.
- Changing perceptions and behaviours towards children with disabilities takes time. When (School-) community members reflect on their actions and values they can evaluate how these contribute to the exclusion experienced by children with disabilities and their families.
- Supplementary reading materials in which children with disabilities have a (positive) role, are hardly available in low- and middle-income countries.
- There is a need to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children's books and put more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of children.
- Developing and contextualizing more storybooks that depict and describe diversity, such as children with different (dis)abilities, have proven useful to help communicate and practice inclusive values.
- Communities and schools that promote inclusion, teach, and demonstrate to children how to value the uniqueness of every child.

1. Background

Children's books are an invaluable source of information and values. They reflect the attitudes in society about diversity. The visual and verbal messages children receive from storybooks influence their ideas about themselves and others. Depending on the quality of the story, they can reinforce (or undermine) children's affirmative self-concept, teach accurate (or misleading) information about people of various identities, and foster positive (or negative) attitudes about diversity. Consequently, carefully developing and selecting stories to challenge stereotyping, discrimination and exclusion is a critical educational task for adults raising children at home, in communities and at school.

Books invite children to use their imagination and expand their vocabularies. If the stories reflect the diverse groups of people around them in a positive manner, children can learn to develop respect for self and others. Children's stories should be both a mirror in which children can see themselves (positively) reflected and a window through which they can explore the world around them. Books can illustrate how people from diverse backgrounds can play and work together, solve problems and overcome obstacles. At its best, children's literature that highlights the multi-cultural, multi-religious and multifaceted ability of human beings, helps children understand that despite differences, all people have similar feelings and hopes.

Those feelings include love, sadness and fear and the desire for friendship, fairness, and justice. Writing, illustrating, publishing, and selecting good children's books involves a zero-bias approach and an active commitment to challenging prejudice. It thus provides a realistic glimpse into the lives of diverse groups of people, so that children learn to recognize unfairness and injustice, and together challenge such inequity at their own level.

2. How stories and illustrations can teach children about disability

Children with disabilities are three to four times more likely to be victims of name-calling, teasing and bullying than their peers without disabilities. Often, children with disabilities are depicted and described in sad and passive ways rather than in positive and active ways. They tend to be judged by their impairments and weaknesses rather than by their abilities. What they can do well is often ignored.

Many children with disabilities or learning difficulties are intelligent, yet because they cannot spell words correctly or have a hard time paying attention, or they cannot hear, see, communicate, or move around the same way as others and therefore learn differently, they are misunderstood and not given the opportunity to learning to their full potential. It is important to create and provide books in school-libraries and classroom reading-corners with characters that have a disability or learning difficulties. And it is equally important to celebrate children's differences and support children to express themselves in different ways. Teachers can use storytelling as an opportunity to initiate meaningful conversations about diversity and treating each other with respect.

Every school should have a collection of positive picture- and story books that are either about disability or feature children with disabilities. Some books may inform and educate children about disabilities, others acknowledge the challenges of living with a disability.

Books should also include children with disabilities casually or incidentally – reinforcing the important message that they are children first as ordinary members of society and should not be singled out because of their differences.

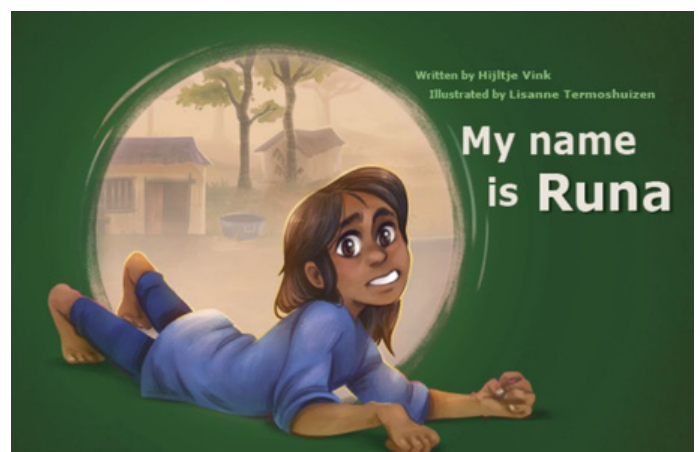
3. 'Stories for inclusion' project

The project was developed by 2 small, dedicated NGOs in the Netherlands (Biblioneef-Nederland and Niketan Foundation) together with their partner organisations in Ghana (Biblioneef-Ghana) and Bangladesh (Disabled Rehabilitation and Research Association). It is a 2-year pilot project, while exploring possibilities to continue and scale up.

The project is based on reviews in each country about the state of disability awareness and the presence of children's books about a character with a disability. Unfortunately, hardly any such books exist in Bangladesh and Ghana. Children with disabilities are pretty much invisible!

'Stories for Inclusion' focuses on making children with disabilities visible and ordinary. The key objectives are (1) to provide access to inclusive storybooks to children and teachers to enhance disability awareness and understanding, and (2) to advocate for disability inclusive classroom practices.

The first story was developed in Bangladesh with the title 'My name is Runa'. This book has been used in both project countries, while in Ghana a second story book is in development, which will also be shared with and used in Bangladesh when ready.



4. Learning Brief objective

With this Learning Brief the project countries wish to demonstrate indicative initial results and potential impact. Based on project visit observations, a survey, and interviews with stakeholders a positive story is emerging. Project teams in Bangladesh and Ghana especially wanted to find out whether using storybooks with characters with a disability help to change perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of those without disabilities. In preparing this Learning Brief, country teams also informed each other about their progress and possible challenges and thus provide each other with feedback for support across the project countries.

5. Data collection

The 'Stories for Inclusion' project in Ghana is implemented at school level. Children (with and without disabilities) as well as teachers and head-teachers have been interviewed in project schools. In Bangladesh, the project is implemented both at community level and in schools. As the project is relatively small, mostly qualitative information has been collected through interviews.

6. Project progress in Ghana

What children told us: 70% of children (without disability) confirmed that there are children with a disability in their school. All responding children were aware of the book 'My name is Runa' because their teacher or head-teacher had brought this book for classroom reading and the book was also available in the school library. 80% of children told us that they had read 'My name is Runa' in class and enjoyed the story. Together with their teacher, they also discussed what happened in the story.

When asked about what they found especially interesting about the story, children responded with for example: *"Runa could not play with other children because of her disability", "She was a girl with a disability but was able to become a teacher", "Runa was not liked by the children in the community, but she was liked by her mother", "Her uncle dug a trench for her so she could learn to walk", "Runa was teased by people in the community".*

Children felt sad and sorry about the way Runa was treated and because of that how she was lonely without any friends. Some children added that they felt happy for Runa after she got a chance to go to school and become a teacher herself.

All children who read the book said it had changed the way they think about children with disabilities. Their answers included: *"We must accept and respect children with disabilities, because they can do well in future if given a chance", "children with disabilities also have the right to go to school" and "When we are playing, we should let them join."*



"Before reading the book, I did not want anyone with a disability to come close. After reading the book, I have understood that we must get close and support them."

Student, Knowledge and Faith School

What teachers and head-teachers told us: all teachers were positive about “My name is Runa”. They said for example: *“It gives insight about children with disability”, “The story teaches that a disability is not an inability”, and “It will help learners appreciate each and everyone’s ability in class.”*

They all felt the story changed the way they used to think of children with disabilities, expressed as: “I have come to know that every child is unique and children with disabilities can do well”, “We need to do better in living together with these children”, “It has helped me to understand that children with disability are not different from children without disabilities” and “those children also have feelings and emotions to be considered”.



“I now know that it is not witchcraft as told in our society in Ghana but rather a disability from birth or through an accident.”

Assistant head-teacher primary school

All teachers have used “My name is Runa” during library period and for classroom reading. Those lessons also included discussion about the pictures and the content, questions and answers, observations. The average class size is between 60 and 65 children per class. All teachers believe that reading and discussing the story helps children without disabilities see their peers with disabilities in a more positive light, because “now they know it is important to show them love, care, and not call them names.”

Some teachers even claim that children without disabilities include their peers with disabilities more nowadays.

Teachers have also shown “My name is Runa” to colleagues and discussed the importance of such story books. Some colleagues were emotional, but they said they learnt from the story. Others suggested ways to support such children in class. In Ghana, Professional Learning Course (PLC) time was also used for this purpose! One of the head-teachers also discussed “My name is Runa” at one of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. And some teachers read the book at home with their own children!

Teachers were asked for suggestions to improve disability inclusion in Ghana. Their answers ranged from: “Teach them vocational skills”, “Engage in educating society for example through community meetings or in churches and mosques”, “Use positive posters that show abilities and skills of children and youth with a disability”, “Sensitize parents and teachers in meetings.”

7. Project progress in Bangladesh

“My name is Runa” is used in 20 primary school by 150 teachers. Already more than 4050 children have received and read the book. The story has generated innovative educational activities, designed by local teachers, such as quizzes between schools, an art competition, and young girls with cerebral palsy visiting mainstream schools to talk about living with a disability.

What children told us: children with disabilities or learning difficulties recognize themselves in Runa and her story. Not all children enjoyed Runa’s story because it made them sad, as they have similar experiences such as name-calling (e.g. donkey) and being excluded from (play) activities. Runa modelling with clay together with other kids and dressing up with her cousin were highlighted as enjoyable parts of the story.

Children without disabilities especially remember Runa not being called by her own name and the teasing and bullying. They did express admiration for how Runa overcame all this and went to school and trained to be a teacher.

“Before reading this storybook, I called one of my classmates ‘disabled’. I now realize that this hurts his feelings and call him by his name. I do not laugh when I see him but play with him and help him with his schoolwork!” Student



What parents told us: especially parents of children with disabilities believed more storybooks like ‘My name is Runa’ should be used in schools all over Bangladesh to change how people perceive disability. However, also parents of typical children were positive about this book. Though not all parents were literate themselves, their children brought the book home and read the story to them.



“I read ‘My name is Runa’ with my daughter. She cried after reading the story because she faces similar problems as Runa did.”

Mother of child with a disability

What teachers told us: all teachers considered “My name is Runa” an asset for themselves, their students and for the school library as storybooks about disability are not available in Bangladesh. They use the book in different activities (e.g. role-play) and some also talk about this book with colleagues in other schools, friends, and neighbours in their communities.

Teachers say they have observed more positive behaviours in students towards their peers with disabilities. But they themselves also changed the way they perceive children with disabilities. Still, there continue to be barriers such as disability inaccessible roads and school buildings and their own lack of professional knowledge and pedagogical skills for disability-inclusive teaching.

To create awareness about discrimination and bullying in lower primary classes students with a disability visit mainstream schools. Aysha, who has cerebral palsy, tells children that nobody wanted to sit next to her in school, that other children called her names and that she was not called by her name. During such a lesson, children are asked “Have you ever been teased?” and “Did this ever happen to you?” During such a conversation it becomes clear for everyone that all children – with and without disabilities – have the same feelings and dreams. This brings children together. During The coming 6 months Aysha and Afroza – both with cerebral palsy – visit 10 schools each to tell their stories.

Bangladesh project team



8. What have we learned?

The enthusiasm of the teachers and their interest in the project showed us we were hitting the right note. Several schools went further by holding training of trainer sessions with all the teachers. In both countries, the teachers acknowledged their critical role as educators in supporting children with disabilities to become part of the inclusive mainstream classroom and promoting a learning environment in which they do not feel different from their peers. This could be achieved by re-appraising their own understanding of disability. They expressed a wish to learn more about various disabilities and how to respond fairly and respectfully, considering individual learning support needs. Teachers who discussed or showed the book to colleagues in other schools were asked to also arrange copies of “My name is Runa” for those other schools!

Children, too, were better aware of their peers with disabilities or learning difficulties. “My name is Runa” was in most cases read in class and the teacher’s questions helped to ensure their full understanding of the story. They enjoyed the story and developed an emotional attachment to Runa. Feelings such as empathy, compassion, and a desire to help were often expressed. Children spontaneously drew conclusions over their own role in engaging with their peers with a disability or learning difficulty. This included involving them during play time as well as finding games and activities they could play together, thus showing their acceptance of their friend’s disability or difficulty.

In Bangladesh, parents are also actively involved in the ‘Stories for Inclusion’ project. “My name is Runa” is used in community meetings and in small-scale community schools, so-called ‘veranda schools’. It has become clear that change of mindsets must start at home within the family and the community.



It has been amazing to see what one storybook can change how children, parents and teachers perceive disability. Still, we do not know yet how long-lasting this will be. Therefore, awareness raising, knowledge building and sharing, and continued monitoring will be important, especially listening to children with and without disabilities or learning difficulties about their experiences at home and in school.

All key stakeholders, children (with and without disability), parents and teachers request more disability-inclusive storybooks, because awareness creates understanding and empathy. Though not all project schools have students with disabilities in every class, it is important to be prepared as teachers, parents, and students, and welcome and support these learners when they come. It is not easy to share the storybooks widely with schools in Bangladesh as this requires official permission from the ministry of education. In Ghana, books can only be distributed to school-libraries and thus be used for library periods. Teacher capacity building for (disability-) inclusive education beyond project schools also requires official permission. Therefore, it may be important to partner with bigger local NGOs in the future.

"I read Runa's story..... Using storybooks to create disability awareness is a very good approach..... Opportunities must be created [for children with disabilities] to become part of the mainstream."

Sub-district official Mrs. Abida Sultana

9. Where will we go from here?

‘Stories for Inclusion’ is a new strategy, using storybooks to create disability awareness and understanding and it is working! There have been changes, maybe still small, because its early days yet, but there is the beginning of a change. The children we interviewed say their perceptions of children with disabilities have changed now they have read the story “My name is Runa”.

Country teams in both countries have expressed interest in developing more contextualised (disability-) inclusive reading materials. This includes identifying existing materials from other countries for (re-) printing, (re-) publishing and/or translation. In addition, partnerships need to be developed with organisations involved in the development of low-cost, quality supplementary readers, such as Room to Read (RtR) or Grow Your Reader Foundation (GYRF) or IRead Ghana Foundation, to encourage these organisations to mainstream disability. Digital storybooks, such as shared by Asia Foundation or the Africa Storybook, will also be looked at, though most schools and communities ‘Stories for Inclusion’ works with, have no internet access (yet).

The project team in Ghana has expressed the wish to learn from the community approach in Bangladesh. If discrimination and exclusion decrease at a family and community level, the task at school may become less challenging. The Bangladesh project team expressed the wish to learn more about ‘reading for fun’ approaches used in Ghana by Biblionef. Cross-country sharing and learning should continue to take place regularly. Therefore, it will be important to develop a bigger network of like-minded organisations in both countries to work together in making this happen.

Both country teams expressed lack of teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach learners with (different) disabilities or learning difficulties.

Resources (practical tools; video-clips; documentation) will be identified to share with both country-teams to help teachers gain more disability knowledge. A practical teacher guide is in preparation that describes common childhood disabilities and learning difficulties, including their causes, (warning) signs and symptoms, and specific classroom and teaching strategies to address the learning support needs of such students in inclusive regular classrooms.

In both countries, collaboration with relevant local government officials, education departments and strategic individuals or organisations, will be strengthened to enhance chances for education programme institutionalisation of ‘Stories for Inclusion’ in each country.

Country teams are of the opinion that the project must continue and be scaled up. The pilot phase focused on children of a specific age group. A whole school approach, including pre-primary classes, would generate more impact. In addition, it would also be good to see more locally published inclusive storybooks through a stronger partnership with authors, illustrators, and publishers in each project country. Concrete examples include the Ghana Book Development Council (GBDC)[1], Ghana Writers Association (GWA)[2], and in Bangladesh Guba books[3].

This Learning Brief serves to highlight the process and some of the lessons learnt from the implementation of the pilot project “Stories for Inclusion”, supported by Niketan Foundation and Biblionef Nederland, funded by Provicimis (Switzerland), Stichting Onderwijs Steunfonds and Stichting de Zaaier. However, the views expressed, and information contained in this Learning Brief are not necessarily those of or endorsed by these funding agencies, which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

[1] <https://www.gbdc.gov.gh/>

[2] <https://internationalauthors.org/news/member-spotlight-ghana-association-of-writers/>

[3] <https://gubabooks.com/>