

# Busting myths about education and disability

This document busts eight myths about education and disability. It has been developed by the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) and highlights how projects operating in communities across the globe are successfully busting these myths and ensuring children with disabilities can access quality education.

We believe that these myths have a significant and persistent negative impact on children with disabilities. Discussions around education and disability need to drive action that is practical: one way to do this is to challenge misconceptions. Bringing evidence and data to the fore is an essential step in taking action to achieve better educational outcomes for all children with disabilities.

## THROUGH THE WORK OF GEC PROJECTS:

**154,386**

girls with disabilities who previously faced significant barriers to attending school are now in education.

**6,070**

assistive devices have been provided by GEC projects to support girls and boys with disabilities and their ability to learn.

*“There are not any/many children with disabilities in our school or community.”*

*“It is too expensive to include children with disabilities in education, as they need appropriate accommodations.”*

*“Boys and girls with disabilities have the same needs.”*

*“Inclusion initiatives only benefit children with disabilities.”*

*“There is no point offering vocational or livelihood training to girls with disabilities.”*

*“It is too hard to keep girls with disabilities safe in education.”*

*“Mainstream teachers cannot teach children with disabilities.”*

*“Children with disabilities cannot learn at the same rates as their non-disabled peers.”*

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# Myth #1

“There are not any/many children with disabilities in our school or community”

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## **BUSTED:**

GEC projects have identified girls and boys with both visible and invisible disabilities in their target groups. Invisible disabilities are not always apparent. There are many types including physical, mental or neurological conditions. There have been higher than anticipated numbers of children with disabilities identified for support in many GEC projects which has required a change in response. This has included the need for mental health and psychosocial support interventions to be mainstreamed for all those who need it, including those with disabilities.



The **SOMGEP project** in Somalia found that 15% of their target girls had disabling levels of anxiety and depression which were affecting their ability to learn. The project team has worked hard to stay tuned into the psychosocial aspects of girls' experiences and high incidents of anxiety and depression through a support network of mentors, peer-to-peer connections and community education committees.

## Myth #2

“It is too expensive to include children with disabilities in education, as they need appropriate accommodations.”

### BUSTED:

Supporting children with disabilities is extremely cost effective.<sup>1</sup> The returns on investment in the education of children with disabilities<sup>2</sup> are two to three times higher than that of children without disabilities. Appropriate accommodations do not have to be expensive and can take the form of building a rail in any new toilet, or building slopes rather than steps for access. Improved lighting and elimination of hazards will be better and safer for all children. Research has demonstrated that the cost of accessibility is generally less than 1% of total construction costs; however, the cost of making adaptations after a building is completed is far greater.<sup>3</sup> Every school that is built or refurbished should be accessible, eliminating the need for costly adaptations at a later date.

In the GEC, schools in many countries, including **Sierra Leone, Nepal, Uganda and Kenya**, have made appropriate changes to accommodate girls with disabilities. Projects are also providing assistive devices which are having a positive impact on attendance, participation and transition of girls with disabilities, justifying the relatively higher costs. Girls who need assistive devices are more likely to have complex needs or experience multiple intersecting inequalities and many would be otherwise be excluded entirely from education programming. Projects are also leveraging existing government services, including health, safeguarding and social protection services, to keep costs down. In fact, many projects have enabled girls and their parents to access government financial assistance and benefits that they were entitled to but had been unable to access before.

<sup>1</sup> Value for Money Why investing in children with disabilities is worth every penny: <https://ablechildafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Value-for-Money-Why-investing-in-children-with-disabilities-is-worth-every-penny.pdf> What drives value for money in Girls' Education Challenge projects that support girls with disabilities? [gec\\_spotlight\\_brief\\_3\\_vfm\\_disability\\_v3.pdf](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/10324/388640EdNotes1August2005CostOfAccess12.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (girlseducationchallenge.org)

<sup>2</sup> Disability and returns to education in a developing country – ScienceDirectWorld Bank Document

<sup>3</sup> <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/10324/388640EdNotes1August2005CostOfAccess12.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>



## Myth #3

“Boys and girls with disabilities have the same needs.”

### BUSTED:

Children or young people with disabilities are not a homogenous group, but girls and boys with disabilities are often treated as though they are. This undervalues their differences, including how they experience disability, as well as being female or male. Disability can affect or exacerbate traditional gender roles and dynamics. For example, girls with disabilities may be seen as less ‘feminine’ or asexual, unable to establish a relationship or have children. They are at greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Throughout the world, girls with disabilities are subject to double discrimination, based on their gender and disability. The lack of adequate toilets for girls, including girls with disabilities, especially during menstruation, is also a cause of repeated absences and drop-out from school. Girls and women with disabilities face even greater challenges in managing their menstruation hygienically and with dignity. Girls with disabilities face many barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and care. As stressed by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities, a lack of access to SRH information for girls and young women with disabilities can increase their risk of suffering sexual violence. This, in turn, can aggravate existing disabilities or create secondary disabilities, such as psychosocial trauma.

**Plan International (Supporting Adolescent Girls’ Education (SAGE), Zimbabwe)** found that 84% of girls with disabilities had challenges accessing safety and protection services, as well as inadequate menstrual hygiene management essentials, contraceptives, condoms and other SRH services. SAGE addressed this through their inclusive work on gender-based violence and SRH. Adopting an intersectional lens meant that the project moved beyond assumptions around the needs of girls with disabilities, and instead addressed the barriers as systemic and structural, rather than the identities of disability and gender themselves.



# Myth #4

“Inclusion initiatives only benefit children with disabilities.”

## BUSTED:

Concerns are often raised about that the inclusion of students with disabilities might come at the expense of non-disabled classmates. However, research has demonstrated that including students with disabilities in mainstream education can bring about academic and social benefits for all students.<sup>4</sup> Inclusive education does not set boundaries around particular ‘needs’. Rather, it is viewed as a process to reduce barriers to learning and to ensure the right to education for all, regardless of individual differences. In the GEC, projects with successful learning outcomes for girls with disabilities followed good teaching practices and built more reflective practices in their teacher training which benefitted every learner.

**Link Education International (TEAM Girl Malawi)**, ensured community-based education facilitators were reflective and adaptive in addressing the needs of the diverse group of students found in most classrooms. The key learning point for the project was that adaptations which are made to include learners with disabilities benefitted all learners, no matter the barriers they are experiencing. An inclusive facilitator who recognises that a student is struggling to concentrate in class for a range of reasons, whether these are related to disability, home life or something else, will reinforce key concepts using different techniques, use multiple learning aids, provide additional breaks and support the learner to catch up with homework or remedial classes. As a result, instead of singling out learners with disabilities or other challenges for different treatment, everyone is supported to participate, and the variety of participation methods makes learning more fun and more effective for all.

<sup>4</sup> [Academic achievement of students without special educational needs in inclusive classrooms: A meta-analysis – ScienceDirect](#), [EducationThinkPieces\\_7\\_DisabilityInclusion.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)



# Myth #5

“There is no point offering vocational or livelihood training to girls with disabilities.”

## BUSTED:

The truth is, like anybody else, girls and young women with a disability can perform a job as long as they receive the necessary training. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) leads to improved job prospects, and to deny this to a young woman with a disability can have devastating impact on her life, as well as the life of her children. Many GEC projects offer transition pathways into work and provide inclusive vocational and skills training and have successfully provided young women and older girls with opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

This is due to the combination of barriers to young women participating in TVET, as well those for people with disabilities. This has a knock-on effect, as people with disabilities are two times less likely to be employed than people without disabilities. Yet young women and men with disabilities can make important economic contributions to their own families and households, and to society as a whole. International Labour Organisation estimates have shown that, if the employment of persons with disabilities, as a group, could be raised to the level of persons without disabilities, then economies could benefit from between 3% and 7% increase in GDP.<sup>5</sup>

Many GEC projects intentionally promoted business skills and vocational training as an alternative pathway for girls with disabilities – including girls with intellectual disabilities – with positive results.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ilostat.ilo.org/international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-how-disability-affects-labour-market-outcomes/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vsointernational.org/news/blog/sewing-the-seams-of-inclusion-and-other-stories-of-hope>

**Leonard Cheshire’s (Expanding Inclusive Education Strategies for Girls with Disabilities Kenya) Endline Evaluation** demonstrated that girls with disabilities were more likely, at statistically significant levels, to transition successfully to vocational training than girls without disabilities. Older girls and young women with disabilities have been able to start small businesses or gain employment. This has been done by supporting girls with disabilities, working with individual girls and their capabilities, showcasing diverse vocational and employment pathways, fostering job preparation through inclusive apprenticeships, mentorships and entrepreneurship training, and building capacity of facilitators and master craftspeople in inclusive vocational training.



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## Myth #6

“It is too hard to keep girls with disabilities safe in education.”

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### BUSTED:

Parents have reported that their fears around safety was amongst the key reasons for girls with disabilities never enrolling or dropping out of school. These decisions were also often influenced by teachers or peers with negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. GEC projects found that girls with disabilities experience higher rates of bullying or harassment in schools than other girls and can be more vulnerable to violence and abuse than others. Girls with disabilities are less likely to report abuses or receive the protection and support they need when they have been abused. However, schools can also be an entry point for preventing future cases of school-related, gender-based violence by shifting norms and behaviours around violence, including addressing stigma against girls with disabilities. GEC projects working with girls with disabilities have strengthened reporting systems, implemented violence prevention strategies and supported girls' awareness of violence. This has led to a notable decline in bullying of girls with disabilities across projects since baseline. Girls with disabilities now feel safer and more confident in reporting incidents, and parents feel more comfortable sending their girls with disabilities to school. Preventing and responding to school violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities calls for an integrated approach, targeting multiple levels of the education system.



**Leonard Cheshire** worked with Community Resource Workers who supported girls with disabilities and undertook community-based sensitisation activities. This led to a reduction in stigmatisation, discrimination and abuse from the community, including when girls with disabilities travelled to and from school. Parent groups provided peer support, enabling parents to connect, share experiences and become advocates in their communities. The project also strengthened child protection mechanisms in the community and schools. Child-to-Child clubs were established in schools, which brought children with and without disabilities together to provide opportunities for social interaction and friendships. This significantly reduced peer-to-peer discrimination and increased positive experiences and feelings of belonging. Child-friendly information on safeguarding, including information on referral pathways, was adapted for children with disabilities to include large fonts and Braille information.



# Myth #7

“Mainstream teachers cannot teach children with disabilities.”

## BUSTED:

Inclusive education starts with the understanding that educating children with disabilities can first be done by improving teaching and learning for all children. GEC projects have worked with teachers to dispel the common assumption that teaching children with disabilities requires extra disability training and skills. Projects with successful learning outcomes for girls with disabilities built more reflective practices in their teacher training. Rather than taking a standardised approach to teaching learners with specific challenges, this approach asked facilitators to be problem solvers in the learning environment, make adaptations to pedagogy and timing of lessons and modify

learning spaces to account for multiple barriers faced by their students.

GEC projects found that a whole-school, twin-track approach to inclusive education works. This includes the training of school management and leaders in inclusive pedagogy, including gender transformative approaches, encouraging peer support between students and within teacher groups, and offering more joined-up support with parents work to promote positive learning progression. This is supported by system strengthening work, such as advocacy for inclusive education and working with government teacher training systems (i.e. teacher training colleges). [Link Education](#)

[International \(TEAM Girl Malawi\)](#), was particularly effective in its continuous teacher professional development. Teachers changed their teaching practices by trying out new inclusive methodologies and adapting them to meet better the needs of their learners with and without disabilities. By locating inclusive teacher professional development at the school level, support was more sharply tailored to meet needs, enabled professional discussions, and encouraged school leadership and local government officials to observe, understand and champion new approaches. The project found that improvements in a supportive learning environment led to improvements in both literacy and numeracy.

[Leonard Cheshire](#) focused their efforts on continuous school-based teacher professional development. Teachers changed their teaching practices by trying out new inclusive methodologies and adapting them to meet the needs of their learners with and without disabilities. By locating inclusive teacher professional development at the school level, support was more sharply tailored to meet needs, enabled professional growth, and encouraged school leadership and local government officials to observe, understand and champion new inclusive approaches. The project found that improvements in a supportive learning environment led to significant improvements in both literacy and numeracy, and the work that the project did to roll out school-based inclusion teams and support the enactment of national inclusive education policies will have a long-lasting impact on inclusive education for children with disabilities in Kenya.





## Myth #8

“Children with disabilities cannot learn at the same rates as their non-disabled peers.”

### BUSTED:

GEC evaluations show positive gains in learning outcomes for girls with disabilities. This is despite lower absolute levels of attainment for girls with disabilities compared to their non-disabled peers. However, merely focusing on absolute learning levels does not support understanding of what is effective in promoting learning amongst girls with disabilities and understanding progress. It is important to recognise the generally low learning levels on entry into education. Challenges around high levels of cognitive impairments in some cohorts and understanding difficulties such as dyslexia and the lack of access to professional

support, coupled with how disability is not static (all projects report changes over time when using the Washington Group questions), means that triangulation of data is crucial to understand what is happening at any one time. Furthermore, if assessments are not modified they do not reflect accurate levels of learning and act as a barrier to understanding progress.

While it is clear from baselines that disabled girls are starting out with lower literacy and numeracy levels than girls without disabilities, midline evaluations are showing positive gains in learning outcomes for girls with disabilities, despite the challenges of COVID-19.

ENGAGE’s midline evaluation demonstrates gains for girls with profound/multiple disabilities, increasing self-care and reliance skills. [World Education Inc. \(Strategic Approaches to Girls’ Education, Ghana\)](#) reported that girls with disabilities experienced the most significant learning gains. [Leonard Cheshire, Plan International \(SAGE, Zimbabwe\)](#), [VSO \(Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education, Nepal\)](#) and [International Rescue Committee \(Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient, Sierra Leone\)](#) have seen the gap in learning scores between girls with disabilities and their non-disabled peers decrease. Mobilising flexible and multi-modal learning pathways has effectively supported educationally marginalised girls to access high-quality accelerated learning and life skills sessions.



Click on the links to read more to find out how the Girls' Education Challenge projects support girls with disabilities:

- [What drives value for money in GEC projects that support girls with disabilities?](#)
- [Leave no girl behind: Updating our commitments to the most marginalised girls](#)
- [All means all: What happens when you include girls with disabilities?](#)
- [Improving access, retention and learning for children with disabilities](#)



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