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# Teacher professional development for students with disability in the Asia-Pacific

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# The GEM Centre

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*Policy brief: Teacher professional development for students with disability in the Asia-Pacific*  
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# Disability-inclusive teacher professional development is crucial for improving access to and quality of education for students with disability in low- and middle-income countries.

## Background

Around the world, policymakers and development organisations are increasingly supporting the education of students with disability, particularly in the bid to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 – to ensure ‘inclusive and equitable quality education for all’. Yet globally, more than half of students with disability drop out of secondary school due to the lack of support in classrooms (UNESCAP, 2019).

In the Asia-Pacific region, resource shortages and high student drop-out rates significantly impact the shift to inclusive education. Additionally, educational segregation of students with disability is widely accepted in low- and middle-income countries in the region, despite international evidence of improved academic and social outcomes for students with disability educated in inclusive settings. Developing teachers’ understanding of disabilities and building their capacity to implement evidence-based inclusive teaching practices and effectively use assistive technologies, are key to transitioning to inclusive education of students with disability.

This policy brief presents recommendations for policymakers and development organisations from the latest GEM Centre [review of evidence on in-service professional development programs for disability-inclusive education in low- and middle-income-countries in the Asia-Pacific region](#). Important findings are presented alongside information on how to access and use the available evidence.

## Recommendations



### **Measure effectiveness of teacher professional development programs**

Policymakers and development organisations should undertake high-quality research to determine whether disability-inclusive teacher professional development programs are effective at improving teacher practice and student learning. Documenting program effectiveness provides useful evidence for policies, practices and investments.



### **Support research on psychosocial wellbeing in schools**

Further research is needed to understand the impact of interventions undertaken to increase the capacity of teachers to support the psychosocial wellbeing of all students. This is critical as teacher professional development programs in disability-inclusive education often fail to address strategies to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing and mental health of students. This is despite evidence that students with disability are at increased risk of developing mental health difficulties that are recognised by the World Health Organisation as psychosocial disabilities.



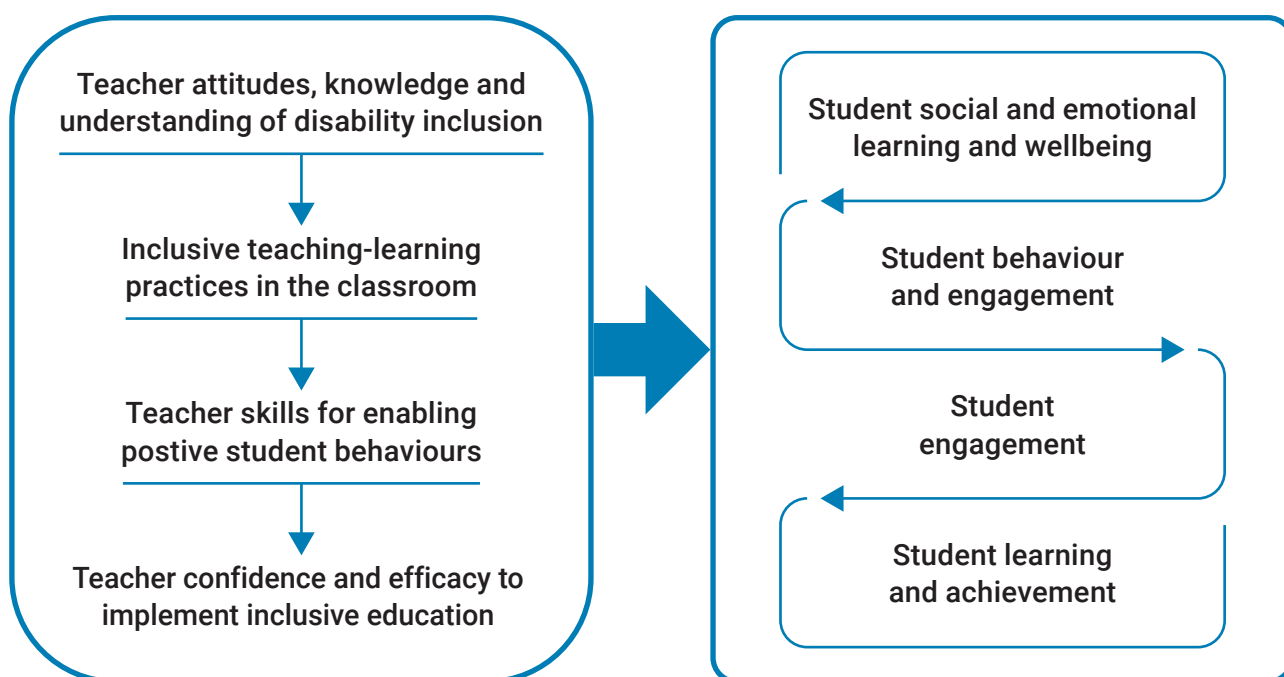
### **Collaborate to collect and share results of program effectiveness**

Policymakers, researchers, development organisations and organisations of Persons with Disability in the Asia-Pacific region should collaborate to share and collect evidence. Working collaboratively will ensure access to more resources, including technical expertise for a richer evidence base, and wider dissemination of the findings to relevant stakeholders. Ultimately, this evidence should be used to advocate for, or influence policy, practice and system changes in countries in the region. This would be particularly beneficial for smaller countries in the Asia-Pacific.

## Synthesising the evidence

Evidence was mapped about professional development programs on disability inclusion for teachers of early years to year 12 students in low- and middle-income countries in the Asia-Pacific region from the year 2000 to 2021. Altogether, 50 studies from 16 low- and middle- income countries in the Asia-Pacific region were selected that had sufficient information on teacher development programs for disability inclusion.

Teacher outcomes, such as improving attitudes and knowledge of disability-inclusive education, use of evidence-based inclusive teaching-learning practices that support positive behaviours, and increased confidence for building inclusive environments, are considered important for improving learning, behaviours, engagement and wellbeing for all students (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Relationship between teacher and student outcomes of disability-inclusive teacher professional development

The findings of the review are presented in an [interactive evidence map](#) that shows details of the studies identified through the systematic search process. Policymakers and development organisations can use this evidence map to assist with decisions concerning teacher professional development programs on disability inclusion. The evidence presented in the map enables policymakers and development organisations to:

- understand current research gaps, identify areas with the most evidence and promote research in areas with less evidence accumulation
- allocate additional resources to programs that provide evidence of effectiveness and impact
- reassess support for existing programs that are ongoing in the region to support teacher professional development
- focus on countries of interest to ensure there is ample support to implement disability-inclusive education goals.

# Findings

## Studies vary extensively in methods and design

The studies included in the review vary extensively in their design – from experimental, to quasi-experimental, and observational. While some studies simply discuss the intended outcomes of a program, others gather program data to measure effectiveness. The variety of data collection methods used makes it difficult to compare outcomes across studies.

To support the practical use of the evidence presented, actual (measured) versus intended (discussed but not measured) program outcomes are distinguished in the evidence map. Among the studies included in the review, 41 studies report actual outcomes, while 9 studies discuss the intended outcomes for the TPD interventions.

## Improving teacher attitudes and knowledge building remains the focus

Most teacher professional development programs described in the studies aim to address teacher attitudes and understanding of disability-inclusive education. This is due to low levels of understanding of disabilities and disability-inclusive practices amongst a large proportion of teachers in low- and middle-income countries. Therefore, many programs include an introductory workshop to explain the concept of inclusive education for students with disability, and to address school policies for supporting students with disability, accessibility issues at school, flexible curriculum, inclusive assessment, and other topics relevant to building a positive and healthy school environment. Some programs also include activities and workshops where participants demonstrate their understanding by developing inclusive classroom tools and utilising teaching and learning materials.

## Limited focus on student outcomes

Among the studies that gathered data on program outcomes, very few report on outcomes for students. This is particularly evident in studies of programs focusing on physical disability, mental health, developmental disability, and sensory interventions. Understanding the impact of programs targeting different types of disability would be useful to capture where more support is needed.

Another key finding is the scarcity of studies of programs which help to build teachers' capacity to support students' social and emotional learning or wellbeing.



# Disability-inclusive teacher professional development programs in the Asia-Pacific

The 2 examples below demonstrate how targeted teacher professional development programs in low- and middle-income countries in the Asia-Pacific region can lead to improved understanding of disability and inclusion, and positive attitudes towards inclusion at a school level.

## ***Access to Quality Education Program in Fiji***

This program was implemented in schools in Fiji as part of Australia's support to the Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. It focuses on improving access, quality, and sustainability of educational initiatives for all children.

A teacher training program was established as part of a disability inclusion strategy. The aim of the training was to upskill teachers so that they could track the learning outcomes of students with disability with the help of individual education plans and provide targeted support.

Teachers' understanding of disability and inclusion improved as a result of the program. A need for additional training in the areas of behaviour support and diagnosis were also identified.

Find out more about [this training program](#).

## ***Friendly education to persons with disabilities training in Indonesia***

The friendly education to persons with disability training aimed to increase the understanding of teachers in public schools selected as inclusive schools.

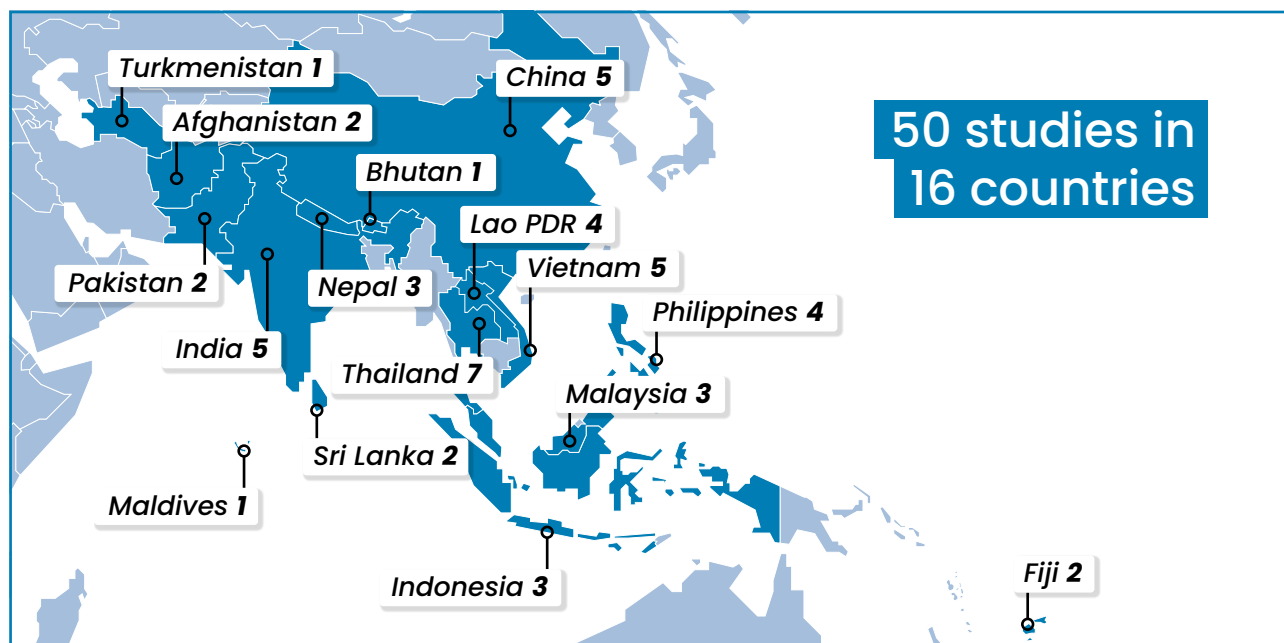
The program included 2 days of training on how to implement disability-friendly education. Modules included: understanding of disability, the concept of inclusive education, school policies for supporting students with disability, accessibility at school, attitudes towards students with disability, flexible curriculum and assessment, availability of supportive training programs, and a safe and healthy school environment.

At the end of the training, participating teachers were surveyed to measure program impact. Teachers' understanding of education for students with disability improved as a result of their participation. The attitudes of school staff towards students with disability also became more positive.

Find out more about the training program in [this study](#).

## Areas of major gaps in the evidence

Overall, evidence on disability-inclusive teacher professional development programs was identified for 16 out of the 41 [low- and middle- income countries](#) in the Asia-Pacific region. This leaves 25 countries where studies of teacher development programs related to inclusive education for students with disability could not be found. These gaps may be due to ongoing education system reforms, where programs are yet to be implemented and evidence of effectiveness is yet to be gathered or documented.



**Figure 2:** Number of studies on disability-inclusive teacher professional development programs by country

The systematic search did not locate studies on teacher development programs in the low- and middle-income countries from this region that specifically address how to:

- support students with disability during emergencies
- design or deliver inclusive assessments for students with disability
- support students with disability through the use of assistive devices and technologies.



## Work with the GEM Centre

Please contact [Syeda Kashfee Ahmed](#) to discuss how the GEM Centre can support you in using this review and evidence map to influence policies on disability-inclusive education.

### More information

Explore the [Evidence Gap Map](#)

Read the [plain language summary](#)

Find out more about the review of [Teacher professional development for disability inclusion in low- and middle-income Asia-Pacific countries: An evidence and gap map](#)

