# Stories from the classroom: how learners with disabilities can promote safe and inclusive education

A citizen reporting research collaboration between Leonard Cheshire and UNESCO on the theme of school violence and bullying

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# Acknowledgments

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# Foreword

"We have all the desires of other children including challenges of growing up as adolescents. We have dreams and need support to achieve them like children without disabilities."

Rodrick Mbalanza, 18, Zambia
Grade 10 University Teaching Hospital Special School (UTH)

**The statement from Rodrick reminds us that young people with disabilities are first of all young people with the same needs and aspirations as all young people across the globe. Yet global evidence reminds us that children and young people with disabilities continue to face a multitude of barriers in attending school and learning, including access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services. They are more vulnerable to violence and bullying, with most reporting that they have experienced it in some form at some time in their lives.**

We should not underestimate that school violence and bullying can be devastating for the victims. The consequences include missing classes, avoiding school activities, dropping out of school. This, in turn, negatively impacts academic achievement and future employment prospects.

The Agenda 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063 have a common resolve, which is to 'Leave no one behind'. This means that there can be no real development unless we address discrimination and inequalities that undermine the agency of people as holders of rights. In advancing this principle, Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The determination of the principle of 'leaving no one behind' in education is deeply embedded in UNESCO's work in the region, through the flagship Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Future (O3) programme. Working together with the O3 programme countries across Sub Saharan Africa, we can achieve positive health and education outcomes for children and young people, including those marginalised and with disabilities.

We are excited about this report as it brings to life the lived realities of young people with disabilities in and around schools. With Leonard Cheshire, we used an innovative citizen reporting approach to garner the perspectives of young people with disabilities and those of teachers so we can collectively further advance our work in promoting safe and inclusive education for all. We believe this report will shed light upon this important matter and help with our joint advocacy efforts.

**Prof Hubert Gijzen
Director and Representative, UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa**

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**Every learner with a disability has a right to a quality education and to have a say in the issues that affect their lives. However, learners with disabilities are often overlooked in policymaking and denied a chance to raise their voice.**

Empowering persons with disabilities is central to our work. Earlier this year Leonard Cheshire engaged over 500 youth with disabilities across five countries to lead on sharing their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighting their recommendations in our report Crisis Talks.

We recognise the key to achieving sustainable and systemic change is through partnership. Last year, together with our partners, we supported more than 5,000 children with disabilities into school in Africa through our inclusive education programmes. This practical experience helps provide an insight into how school violence and bullying can be significant barriers to the rights of learners with disabilities to a quality education and achieving their potential.

For this important report we have joined together with UNESCO, organisations of persons with disabilities, learners with disabilities themselves and other key stakeholders to shine a light on the situation and the recommendations they want to see implemented.

This report comes at a vital time following the commitments made earlier this year at the G7 and the Global Education Summit, and with the Global Disability Summit on the horizon in February 2022. These findings present an opportunity to drive change in order to embed new approaches to inclusive education, and ensure every learner with a disability can achieve a quality education.

**Tiziana Oliva**
**Managing Director – Global Influencing and Programmes, Leonard Cheshire**

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**Managing Director – Global Influencing and Programmes, Leonard Cheshire**

# Introduction

**All children have the right to an education and to learn in a safe environment. Yet, it is a right that is frequently denied to learners with disabilities.**

Classrooms and school playgrounds can bring conflicting feelings for youth with disabilities. Yes, we want to learn alongside our non-disabled peers and want an education to improve our life chances. However, too often we are fearful of the abuse we can receive in schools.

Every learner with a disability will have their own experience of school bullying. But very few choose to share their stories, and even fewer play a leading role in bringing to light the stories of others. The only way we can truly advocate for change is with data.

That is why our organisation, Youth Action for Disability Inclusion Zambia (YADIZ), is collaborating with UNESCO and Leonard Cheshire on this important citizen reporting project. Our mandate at YADIZ is to advocate for the promotion and protection of the rights of youth with disabilities by youth with disabilities.

Thank you to all the youth with disabilities, parents and teachers who contributed their personal experiences to build the evidence base that can lead to change. We need everyone to share the findings of this report to help ensure all youth with disabilities can feel safe and excel in all learning environments.

**Ian Banda**

**Director – Youth Action for Disability Inclusion Zambia**



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**Director – Youth Action for Disability Inclusion Zambia**

# Executive summary

**The 52 youth with disabilities who provided testimonies in this project have demonstrated that they want to be part of addressing the problem of school violence and bullying.**

The testimonies collected provide a snapshot into the lived experiences of youth with disabilities, using methodology that empowers them to tell their own stories. The results of this project will form part of a larger evidence base of key informant interviews and focus group discussions which demonstrate that learners with disabilities often experience bullying throughout their school years.

The accounts shared by youth with disabilities, so often the unheard voices in this issue, describe a wide spectrum of abuse including everything from exclusion, to name-calling, to physical intimidation and beating.

While most accounts did not report physical abuse, the impact of verbal abuse on learners with disabilities can be deeply impactful and long-lasting. Almost all learners with disabilities reported a reduction in self-esteem and self-worth, which often led to a drop in academic performance. Over half of those interviewed either stopped going to school or were withdrawn entirely because of violence and bullying at school.

A lack of knowledge by non-disabled pupils of disability often drove a wedge between them and pupils with disabilities.

Influences outside the classroom – such as the attitudes of parents of non-disabled learners and community leaders – were cited as a reason why some pupils single out learners with disabilities for ridicule, and in some instances perpetuated the spreading of mistruths.

Youth with disabilities were just as quick to use the project to share their hopes and aspirations. There are five key recommendations that came out of this research, which are being put forward by youth with disabilities to help solve the problem:

- Ensure the implementation of existing laws and policies to safeguard learners with disabilities, including the Zambia Persons with Disabilities Act 2012.

- Provide disability-awareness training to all teachers and pupils and extend this to other key stakeholders in the community.

- Include the link between disability and bullying as a mandatory component of the school curriculum.

- Instigate task groups of key stakeholders, including learners with disabilities, to deliver effective and sustainable solutions.

- Deliver empowerment projects for learners with disabilities to better understand their rights.

A growing awareness of rights frameworks among youth with disabilities has led them to question the success of the implementation of the laws and policies that are there to protect them. Not only that, it has also fostered a desire from youth with disabilities to be included to make sure classrooms are safe and inclusive for all learners.

This report is intended to act as the start of the conversation to ensure the experiences shared in this research lead to action.

# Methodology

**UNESCO and Leonard Cheshire embarked upon an exciting and innovative approach to this research project. The aim was to bring to light the experiences of youth with disabilities and teachers in relation to school violence and bullying.**

This activity empowered youth with disabilities from Zambia to generate first-hand testimonies of their experiences in order to contribute to a strong evidence base to influence change. It also actively involved them in identifying potential solutions to address, mitigate or prevent violence and bullying in the classroom.

The project purposely did not set out to capture large amounts of data – it focussed on providing a snapshot of lived experience by drawing out first-hand testimonies of youth with disabilities by youth with disabilities to complement existing research. For more details see the section on Growing the evidence base.

The testimonies provided in this research constitute rich qualitative data that helps shed light on the form and impact of school bullying.

Little is known about the situation of youth with disabilities globally. Where data does exist – in household surveys and censuses – this involves rigid questions which offer limited understanding of what it is like to be a youth with a disability.

This project is different in that it gives youth with disabilities themselves the chance to tell others what it is like, in their own words and on their own terms.

Where traditional forms of research often reflect the priorities and interests of researchers, this innovative approach empowers and allows youth with disabilities to have influence by directly communicating their lived-experience first-hand.

By engaging youth with disabilities in issues that affect their lives, they begin to see themselves as part of the solution – as actors in development and not mere beneficiaries.

The approach built on the concept of Leonard Cheshire's 2030 and Counting project, which involved engaging youth with disabilities on the issues that affect their lives by training them as citizen reporters.

The project involved three core components:

- **Training:** Online participatory training workshops were delivered to 12 youth with disabilities on a number of topics including safeguarding, ethics of storytelling, global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, and evidence-informed advocacy. Project partners and key stakeholders were also invited to attend sections of the online training to build awareness and collaboration. Due to the sensitive nature of the theme of the research, Leonard Cheshire recruited those with previous experience of conducting research and who were familiar with this particular methodology. Therefore, citizen reporters who had previously been trained through the Leonard Cheshire 2030 and Counting project were re-engaged for this project.

In addition to the online training, participants had access to refresher modules and quizzes through their mobile phones. This gamification process helped embed learning, build motivation and maintain engagement throughout the project.

- **Data collection:** Once trained, the citizen reporters led community-based interviews with key stakeholders, the majority through a peer-to-peer model. Youth with disability reporters collectively interviewed over 50 other youth with disabilities. The peer-to-peer model can create strong trust and confidence in order to bring to light experiences that might otherwise go unheard. Informed consent was collected prior to each interview, and youth with disabilities could report anonymously. Citizen reporters received a stipend to cover their travel costs and were never left 'out of pocket'.

Two key research questions guided the data collection phase:

1. Tell us in your own words your experience of bullying or violence within a school or learning environment.

2. Tell us in your own words what actions you would like governments and/or learning institutions to take to improve the situation of school bullying and violence for children and youth with disabilities.

- **Data submission and analysis:** The citizen reporters used their mobile phones to submit the collected testimonies to an online reporting hub. The hub was created using an open-source software platform provided through a hosted text service which allows organisations to custom-build interactive chat bots for mobile phones. This provided citizen reporters with the flexibility to submit reports 24/7 and to be guided through an accessible, user-friendly reporting system. Youth with disabilities supported the analysis of data collected. This included selecting which testimonies they felt were the most powerful to use for the advocacy phase, which will follow the publication of this report. This process led to rich data on lived experience.

The methodology adopted the principles of co-production of research by youth with disabilities, which are central to the disability movement. The core principles behind the methodology of this project were:

- **Co-creation:** The project placed youth with disabilities, and the organisations that represent them, at the centre of processes. This involved recruiting the local youth-led implementing partner, YADIZ.

- **Global frameworks:** The advocacy messages will be framed around the Sustainable Development Goals in order to lead to strong influencing activities.

- **Leadership:** The project was shaped and supported by youth with disability citizen reporters, with 2030 and Counting alumni given fresh leadership opportunities.

- **Safeguarding:** The project embedded a 'do no harm' principle across all activities. This included informed consent and providing reporting channels in line with our Safeguarding for All framework.

# Growing the evidence base

**This project is one of a number being led in Zambia, and across the East and Southern Africa region, as a collaboration between UNESCO and Leonard Cheshire on the theme of school violence and bullying.**

The youth with disability-generated testimonies collected through this project were part of a range of initiatives. These included a qualitative research needs assessment on policies and programmes to address school violence and bullying across Lesotho, Botswana, Kenya and South Africa as well as Zambia.

In Zambia, eight key informant interviews and three focus groups sought the views of a further 43 respondents, including learners with disabilities, parents and teachers.

The findings across all projects will be the focus of a virtual cross-regional workshop on school violence and bullying against learners with disabilities in schools.

This project complements UNESCO's existing Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) project as a similar thematic area which also disproportionately affects learners with disabilities.

Growing the evidence base can lead to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Actively involving key stakeholders in this process, including learners with disabilities themselves, can lead to stronger collaborations in achieving the most appropriate solutions.

# Summary of findings

**The citizen reporters collected 61 first-hand testimonies from youth with disabilities, teachers and parents of youth with disabilities. The majority of testimonies (52) were from youth with disabilities. Of these, 55% were female.**

Of the 52 testimonies from youth with disabilities, the majority were over the age of 18 and reported on historical incidents. For those who were under the age of 18, prior consent from parents or guardians was secured. Nine testimonies were collected from teachers or parents, totalling 61 interviews altogether. The testimonies were collected during June and July 2021.

The testimonials focused on the lived experience of bullying, and the ideas, actions and recommendations that youth with disabilities would like to see. Interviews with teachers focused on the same topics.

The findings highlighted that the main forms of bullying faced by youth with disabilities were:

- Mocking and teasing
- Dehumanising language
- Dismissive and excluding attitudes
- Intimidating behaviour

Other accounts frequently referenced were:

- Spreading mistruths about disability (e.g. that it is a curse)
- Physical violence

All youths with disabilities' testimonials contained powerful descriptions of bullying experiences during their school years. To better understand the detail of how bullying and violence manifested, the types of bullying behaviour have been split into themes for the purposes of this report.

## Experiences of bullying

Commonly reported bullying took the form of mocking and teasing:

- "They [other children] would call me names like four eyes during break time."
- "People called me names like 'Kanunka', meaning 'bad odour'."

This included being laughed at and spoken to in unpleasant ways:

- "My schoolmates would put me in the middle of a circle and they would surround me… They would make mocking gestures with their mouth and hands about how I used to talk."
- "My fellow pupils used to laugh at me because my left eye was visually impaired and [I had a] limping leg."

Equally commonly reported bullying was an indirect form of dismissive behaviour. This included being ignored and not listened to, and being excluded – for example not being allowed to join groups:

- "Coming to class assessments, assignments were done in groups, but having a disability I used to do it on my own because none of the group wanted me to be with them. Whenever I want to join the group, the group members refuse me saying the group is full."

## Story A – Youth with disability testimony

"The reason why am writing this story is because I have experienced a lot of challenges in my education as a disabled person. The first day I reported for school I was happy thinking that everyone would understand me just like my family at home.

Soon after the headteacher showed me where my classroom was immediately I entered, the pupils were so surprised to see a person in the wheelchair. Because I looked so different from them, some pupils started laughing, some pupils spit saliva at me, others were even scared, some pupils were mocking me, they even refused to sit next to me.

During break time when I was alone a group of pupils decided to push me off from the wheelchair. Immediately I was taken to the hospital and given an operation. After a month I was discharged from the hospital, so I went home and I decided to give up with school, but my parents encouraged me not to drop out from school but to change the school.

The next day my parents went to get the transfer but the headteacher and the members of staff refused because they promised my parents that it will never happen again. The next day I reported back to school all the pupils apologised to me and to my parents. At the end all the pupils understood me better, cared for me, loved and supported me."

Others spoke of being treated as though they were a burden:

- "Her friends now distance themselves from her because now she is seen to be a burden and a drawback to doing things they used to do together when she had her legs functioning well."

- "My friends used to talk to me with no respect because whenever they saw me in class they would think maybe I want to ask for charity from them or something or maybe I say they used to judge me by my disability."

Bullying could also take the form of being stared at:

- "Each time I went to school the pupils would stare at me like I wasn't a person."

Other kinds of bullying took the form of spreading mistruths about disability, extending to fabricating myths, and ultimately dehumanising learners with disabilities:

- "In some instances I received threats and [they] called me names such as 'ofunta' which meant a mad person."

- "Fellow pupils would refuse to have fun with me 'cause they used to tell me that if they pray with me they can also have children with albinism as well in future."

- "No one wanted to sit next to me because of the myth that disabilities are contagious so I rarely made friends at school."

- "My school life has been a hell whereby my fellow students used to mock me and run away from me saying that if they are mingling with me, they can also have a disability."

- "No one wanted to be friends with me simply because they believed I was born with a disability because I offended someone and as a result that person ended up cursing me. Practically my name in school was the 'cursed child'."

Other behaviour encompassed accusations of not being human, dehumanising learners with disabilities, and saying they have no rightful place in the world:

- "They would mock me and call me names such as "cholemala" meaning disabled, and that I was nothing but someone who was just for God's calling because I had no purpose on earth."

- "I became really embarrassed and annoyed when they called me a robot. That I wasn't a human being and I needed to return to my planet."

> **"No one wanted to be friends with me simply because they believed I was born with a disability because I offended someone and as a result that person ended up cursing me. Practically my name in school was the 'cursed child'."**

Directly intimidating behaviour was also reported such as threats, being stolen from, and spat at, extending to actual physical violence in some instances:

- "He relates to me that one day as he was moving around campus, he bumped into a person. That person threatened to slap him instead of simply directing him to the correct path he was supposed to go."

- "Because I looked so different from them, some pupils started laughing, some pupils spit saliva at me, others were even scared, some pupils were mocking me, they even refused to sit next to me."

- "Friends who were above his age used to steal his school materials and groceries and when he tried to find out who did that he would be threatened and beaten by his elder friends and in his high school at an inclusive school."

- "In her ninth grade her friend mocked and beat her saying she doesn't want to talk much being a quiet person. They beat her for no reason, and when she reports to the teacher they just say "stop fighting" but still they continue beating her for no reason."

## Story B – Youth with disability testimony

"I had meningitis which left my right hand and leg paralysed. At the age of 7 my parents enrolled me at a Special School where I went up to grade 7. Armed with good grades, my parents managed to find me a school place at a state-funded secondary school which has a special unit for those with disabilities and has classes from grade 8 to 12.

Through my perseverance and dedication, I managed to finish school and obtained a full grade 12 certificate. My school days were not as easy as one would think due to a number of challenges which included inaccessible infrastructure. The school infrastructure was not modified to accommodate us with physical disabilities. But the greatest challenge I faced was peer rejection.

My fellow peers, especially those without disabilities, generally tried to bully and sometimes rejected me because they felt that I was not a part of them. I recall how sometimes other pupils would tease, embarrass and steal things from me. In worse situations I would be punched, kicked, pushed or threatened and this made me feel really bad, and the stress of dealing with it made me feel sick.

Sometimes this situation made me not want to play outside or go to school. It became very hard to keep my mind on schoolwork because I was worried about how I was going to deal with the bullies in class.

As this situation got worse, I reported it to my parents who later discussed the problem with the class teacher. Once the teacher was made aware of what was happening, bullying cases reduced because the perpetrators were afraid of being punished."

There were 12 accounts of children with disabilities experiencing bullying behaviour perpetrated by the teachers. This ranged from being humiliated in front of the class, being ignored, to being shouted at and even beaten.

- "I couldn't read or write in my 4th grade. In many instances the teacher would call us in front to read out loud to the class and I had challenges with reading also misspelled some words. Every time I had challenges to read the class ended up laughing."

- "Sometimes teachers used to shout at me that I was not writing in a normal way which made me to have a low self-esteem."

- "She can't push her wheelchair and finds no one to help her mostly and that's how she started crawling from her room to the classroom and … she tried to explain to her teacher but the teacher started to shout and beat her not to come crawling in a classroom."

## Impact of bullying

Most of the bullying was perpetrated as a combination of all of the above themes, with youth with disabilities experiencing direct bullying against a background of indirect marginalising behaviours. The culmination of this mistreatment had a profoundly negative impact. Firstly, it negatively affected nearly all youth with disabilities' self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and wellbeing:

- "My confidence gradually dropped because I started to question myself, if I was really a person."

- "I became a sad child who didn't want to talk to anyone."

- "She used to cry all time."

Others felt fearful and violated:

- "I was afraid of the unknown in school."

- "Some [other pupils] would just come from nowhere to violate me by insulting, pushing me down and saying bad things about me."

## Story C – Youth with disability testimony

"I have a visual and physical impairment and I happened to be the only kid with a disability at my school. My dream was to become an accountant and mathematics became my favourite subject. During the course of my academic journey my fellow pupils used to laugh at me because my left eye was visually impaired and I had a limping leg.

Living with a disability and at the same time growing up in the village was the toughest phase of my life. You can imagine the whole school I was the only child with a disability. Fellow pupils made fun of me, laughed at me, mocked me and isolated themselves from me. No one wanted to be friends with me simply because they believed I was born with a disability because I offended someone and as a result that person ended up cursing me. Practically my name in school was the 'cursed child'.

Consequently, I developed so much hate within myself and hated everything to do with school. Each time I hear my parents send me to school my heart suddenly broke into pieces because the bullying burden was too heavy for me to carry.

As a result, my concentration in class dropped, my grades drastically went down and all the dreams I had were shattered. Generally, I really felt less privileged, inferior and less of a human.

My closing remarks are that there is need to come up with a policy that will enable all teachers to be trained in disability issues and matters relating thereto. This will enable teachers to be knowledgeable about disability and its dynamics. Significantly chances are that teachers will pass a good and positive attitude to all learners and train them to be accommodative and never to discriminate anyone by basis of their disability.

Lastly, there is need to extend advocacy in rural areas because almost everyone perceives disability as a curse or an end result for doing bad. There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about disability and sadly the myths have superseded the truth about disability."

These experiences had a destructive effect on classroom performance, with those interviewed experiencing a drop in their grades:

- "Consequently, I developed so much hate within myself and hated everything to do with school. Each time I hear my parents send me to school my heart suddenly broke into pieces because the bullying burden was too heavy for me to carry... As a result, my concentration in class dropped, my grades drastically went down and all the dreams I had were shattered."

"Consequently, I developed so much hate within myself and hated everything to do with school. Each time I hear my parents send me to school my heart suddenly broke into pieces because the bullying burden was too heavy for me to carry."

Alarmingly, for over half of those spoken to, it resulted in reduced school attendance, or quitting school altogether:

- "I stayed for 3 years without going to school."

Almost half of those interviewed said that they felt marginalised, unheard, and dehumanised:

- "I used to sit at the back to avoid being looked at in a strange way by many learners, unfortunately this brought more harm than good upon myself such that I would barely see what the teacher would write on the board."

- "Because I was living in fear of being mocked and beaten which made me feel isolated and not well accommodated at school. However living a life of not being heard, it's like I was voiceless. I couldn't know where to go and share what I was going through."

A few became emboldened and developed a determination to do well and to support others:

- "She has learned to turn negativity into positivity, what others said she couldn't do or shouldn't because according to them she didn't qualify for it and she knew inside her heart she was able."

## Teacher perspectives

Teacher impressions of forms of bullying included physical abuse, sexual abuse, abuse of authorities and spreading of myths and misconceptions:

- "A teacher … reveals a lot of unthinkable things that happen behind the scenes which he has seen in his three years of working in a special school. From physical abuse to sexual relationships to abuse of authority by those who wield the powers that be."

Teachers saw a whole range of effects as a result of bullying, reiterating the findings from the youth interviewees.

Like with the youth interviews, they spoke of pupils becoming withdrawn and inhibited to speak, and reducing their attendance. They also described how this led to anxiety and depression, resulting in some having behavioural issues:

- "She indicates that when she asks a question, it takes time for them to answer not because they don't know but they feel that other pupils will laugh and make fun of them. She added that a child or young person with a disability who usually experiences anxiety or depression may withdraw from class, and also have fear with how the teacher is treating them."

## Story D – Teacher testimony

"I am a lecturer at a college and I have a visual impairment. I am aware that students with disabilities get bullied in schools by fellow learners. I see these things in school almost every day and once upon a time I was also a student with an impairment and I wasn't an exception when it came to being bullied.

However, bullying comes in many forms. It can be from fellow learners and sometimes it can be from the school system. Examples from school system include, failing to provide necessary materials such as specialised machines to students with a visual impairment. I call this bullying because students are not equipped with sufficient information as compared to other learners. It's actually even difficult for such learners to compete with others who have no disability because their access to information is limited.

Additionally, infrastructure that is not user friendly can entail bullying, because what it simply communicates to learners is that "hello you don't belong here." I remember very well back in the days when I was enrolling at university, my colleague was very passionate about law and wanted to study it. Unfortunately the school denied him a chance to study law because the classes from the school of humanities were designed in a way that it was impossible for him to access. Instead they sent him to the school of education where infrastructure was accessible. He was depressed and very unhappy to miss his childhood dream that he worked so hard for and only to miss it simply because he had an impairment which wouldn't allow him to access classes.

Capacity building should be introduced as a course for teachers whilst they are still training. This will enable teachers to have knowledge of disability rights. If all teachers can understand sign language, know how to deal with those visually impaired and all other types of disabilities, then all these negative talks and attitudes can die a sudden death."

## Story E – Teacher testimony

"There are quite a number of factors that cause bullying and violence in schools, especially among disabled students. To start with school is supposed to be a safe, fun and happy place for every child but this is not much of what we see in most of our schools.

Learners are also intelligent enough to see those who are given attention and those who are not, and bully others about it. Teachers often forget that not all learners catch up or learn at the same pace due to different abilities. Multicultural issues also may cause bullying because of the language, countries, social rank, colour and backgrounds. All these cause violence and bullying.

First and foremost bullying and violence awareness starts from home. In some cases bullying happens in some homes. Parents need to ensure that they educate children correctly to get things done rather than using force, command or belittling. If the opposite is what happens children bring all these attributes into the school setting.

Teachers need to allow more programmes on bullying and violence awareness within the classroom and outside. Guidance counsellors in schools should work hand in hand with parents, class teachers, child youth caregivers (if available in the school) to include children who may display alarming behaviour.

There's a need for our government to look into having multidisciplinary teams in schools or have a team which will meet quarterly to report what happened in that quarter, come up with interventions, see how it works and it goes on. Yes, awareness about disabilities is being done but how to handle or work with children and youths with disabilities is not much. As a result, teachers and parents are not certain how to approach certain attributes of such children/youths. So how then do they pass on correct information to young people?"

Teachers also acknowledged that they had an important role to play in helping to advocate for, and implement, policies which can address the challenges:

- "The school has a zero-tolerance policy towards those who trouble a pupil with a disability, with a suspension to [anyone] deemed a danger to the wellbeing of others."

- "Teachers must also be educating the children on the dangers of violence, not just teaching the book material, because a school is the second home of a child."

"She indicates that when she asks a question, it takes time for them to answer not because they don't know but they feel that other pupils will laugh and make fun of them. She added that a child or young person with a disability who usually experiences anxiety or depression may withdraw from class, and also have fear with how the teacher is treating them."

# Youth solutions and recommendations

"My appeal to all the people out there is to raise your children well to be kind and loving … maybe if I was shown care I would have completed my education."

**Youth with disability interviewee**

Youth with disabilities took up the challenge of providing potential solutions and offered a number of recommendations they felt could improve the situation.

**1. Provide disability-awareness training to all teachers and pupils and extend this to other key stakeholders in the community**

The most common recommendation was to ensure disability-awareness training was provided, not just for teachers and pupils but the wider community.

- "There is need to advocate and sensitize the pupils and the teacher so that we can create an enabling environment and so that everyone can participate on an equal basis with others in their human diversity and dignity."

- "It is the most important step ahead because when they are made aware that persons with disabilities are persons like any other, they will be accommodative and embrace them… People should not just look at the limitations but at the potential which persons with disabilities have."

- "Ignorance levels in schools are very rampant pertaining to disability. Hence the need to reach out to them and educate them. This should also be extended to communities because parents also play a vital role in grooming their children. Basically, if parents can be sensitized then they can teach their children to embrace their friend with disabilities and never to discriminate."

- "There is need to extend advocacy in rural areas because almost everyone if not everyone perceives disability as a curse or an end result for doing bad. There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about disability and sadly the myths have superseded the truth about disability."

## 2. Include the link between disability and bullying as a mandatory component of the school curriculum

Some recommendations went as far as to say they felt disability inclusion and the issue of school bullying must be part of the school curriculum.

- "In my conclusion I would want to add disability issues in our school curriculum so that everyone can know more about disability rights, that they're also human and they deserve all rights that we are entitled to."

- "The curriculum must also create room for learners not just to focus on school materials but lessons like overcoming peer pressure because [for] some children it's the cause of violence and bullying in schools."

## 3. Ensure the implementation of existing laws and policies to safeguard learners with disabilities, including the Zambia Persons with Disabilities Act 2012

Youth with disabilities also wanted to see national laws implemented effectively and strengthened processes within each individual school.
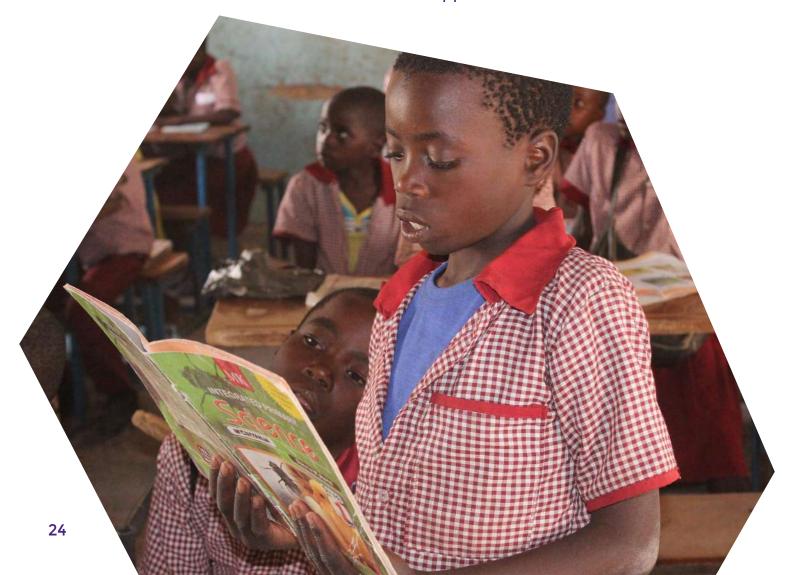
- "Further, he wants the Disability Act of 2012 to be fully implemented and actualize what the Act speaks to. He notes that while there is a law in place, the realities on the ground speak otherwise to what the law says."

- "[Bullying] can be avoided only if the government and other stakeholders become concerned about the welfare of persons with disabilities, not just through laws put on paper, but full actualization of what these laws provide for."

- "He urged the government to look into consideration by putting a serious policy to both public and private institutions to accommodate persons with different disabilities."

- "If the school had a zero tolerance policy towards those who troubled a pupil with a disability, with a suspension to those who were deemed as a danger to the wellbeing of others."

## 4. Instigate task groups of key stakeholders, including learners with disabilities, to deliver effective and sustainable solutions

Youth with disabilities recognised the importance of collaboration for sustainable solutions and wanted to see greater engagement between stakeholders. Among those mentioned were teachers, government departments, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), parents and learners with disabilities themselves.

- "My conclusion is that school administrators start working closely with the parents of the children because parents are the best candidates who know their child well, how he or she behaves at home, so that a lasting solution can be found and end school bullying and violence."

- "My conclusion over this is that parents, teachers, the government and the other organisations which support children in difficult moments should continue to encourage children to go to school."

- "Persons with disabilities are experts of their problems. People cannot continue to represent the interest of a group of people they are not a party to. They do not experience the problems that group go through. This status quo should be ended as persons with disabilities themselves must now be given an opportunity to sit on decision making tables and allowed to make meaningful contributions on what they think is the problem and the solution they think will best address the problem."

- "There's need for our government to look into having multidisciplinary teams in schools or have a team which will meet quarterly to report what happened and see how it works."

## 5. Deliver empowerment projects for learners with disabilities to better understand their rights
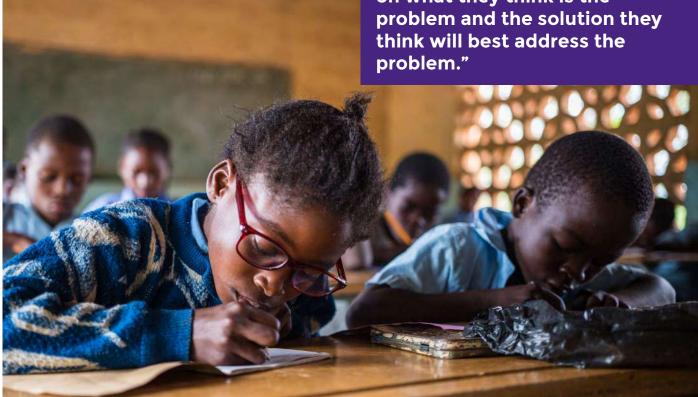
Another recommendation was to see learners with disabilities educated about their rights and provided with opportunities alongside their non-disabled peers.

- "[Learners] with disabilities need to be educated about their rights so that they are able to recognise negative voices when they face them. They will be able to seek redress through proper channels available to them."

- "He further wants to see specific programmes aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. He is concerned that while he did not drop out of school due to bullying, someone somewhere did."

- "I want to see more emphasis on integration activities between youths with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. This will greatly help to end school bullying and violence in schools and the communities at large."

These recommendations highlight the need for all schools to provide safe environments for youth with disabilities to learn free from stigma, violence and bullying.

This report will serve as a basis for evidence-informed advocacy to improve policy and practice on school violence and bullying, thereby increasing the numbers of learners with disabilities going to and staying in school.

"Persons with disabilities are experts of their problems. People cannot continue to represent the interest of a group of people they are not a party to. They do not experience the problems that group go through. This status quo should be ended as persons with disabilities themselves must now be given an opportunity to sit on decision making tables and allowed to make meaningful contributions on what they think is the problem and the solution they think will best address the problem."

# Existing commitments on disability inclusive education

**The recommendations highlight the commitments that will ensure the targets in global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) can be met. Namely:**

**SDG 4** – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

### Target 4a

Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

**CRPD Article 24** – Education

### Paragraph 1

State Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, State Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

A. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity.

### Paragraph 4

In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

**CRPD Article 16** – Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse

### Paragraph 2

States Parties shall also take all appropriate measures to prevent all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse by ensuring, inter alia, appropriate forms of gender- and age-sensitive assistance and support for persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers, including through the provision of information and education on how to avoid, recognize and report instances of exploitation, violence and abuse. States Parties shall ensure that protection services are age-, gender- and disability-sensitive.

# Acronyms

| Acronym | Word |
|---------|------|
| CRPD | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| CSE | Comprehensive Sexuality Education |
| OPDs | Organisations of Persons with Disabilities |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| YADIZ | Youth Action for Disability Inclusion in Zambia |

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