

Every teacher matters

Teachers with disabilities are drivers of inclusive transformation



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Highlights of the online dialogue - 3 December 2025

This online knowledge sharing dialogue was hosted by UNESCO in collaboration with the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (TTF), on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Across classrooms worldwide, teachers with disabilities are redefining what inclusive, quality education looks like and modelling, through their daily practice, the transformation that education systems aspire to achieve. Far from being exceptions, these teachers demonstrate that when diverse life experiences are present within the profession, teaching becomes richer, more human and more responsive to all learners. Their work shows that inclusive education is not only about enabling learners to flourish; it also depends on ensuring that the profession itself is open to all who wish to join it. This dialogue brought together teachers with disabilities, researchers and international partners to highlight their expertise, examine persistent barriers and outline the changes needed to build teaching workforces that reflect the full diversity of society.

Teachers with disabilities shape student perceptions and strengthen inclusive education through innovative pedagogy and adaptive technologies.

- Ms Florence Migeon, Team lead for Inclusion in Education, Section for Inclusion and Gender Equality in Education, UNESCO

A central message emerging from the discussion was that inclusive education cannot advance without equality within the teaching profession – every teacher matters.

Around the world, millions of learners remain excluded, while a global shortage of teachers, projected at 44 million by 2030, threatens progress toward universal schooling. In this context, overlooking the contributions and potential of teachers with disabilities limits both the fairness and the quality of education systems.

We cannot afford to exclude capable educators; inclusive teacher workforces are essential to achieving SDG 4.

- Mr Carlos Vargas, Chief of the Section for Teacher Development, UNESCO, and Head of the Teacher Task Force (TTF) Secretariat

Participants stressed that inaccessible environments, outdated assumptions and limited career opportunities continue to restrict who can enter, thrive in and lead within the profession. At the same time, the event underscored the immense value teachers with disabilities bring to pedagogy, school culture and system innovation.

Teachers with disabilities as innovators, mentors and leaders

A strong theme throughout the dialogue was the transformative pedagogical insight that teachers with disabilities bring to classrooms. Their disability is not a barrier but a lens that enriches teaching.

From Cameroon, Jovanie Destin Bakouatche described how cooperative learning and interactive methods dissolve classroom hierarchies. By mixing learners with and without disabilities in shared tasks and providing varied materials such as large format visuals, audio tools, role-play activities, he ensures that every child participates as an equal. His approach demonstrates how inclusive pedagogy enhances academic engagement for all, not only for students with disabilities.

Inclusive pedagogy is not theory for us; it is a daily practice to break down stigma and create psychological, cultural, and physical inclusion for every learner.

- Mr Jovanie Destin Bakouatche, High School Teacher,
Bepanda Bilingual High School, Douala, Cameroon

Constantine Tuyishimire, teaching in Rwanda, illustrated how thoughtful adjustments to classroom layout, routines and materials can expand learning opportunities. She showed how small accommodations like accessible blackboards, adapted seating, structured movement pathways allow her to teach effectively while enabling children to experience inclusion as a daily reality. Her message was clear: inclusive workplaces for teachers create inclusive classrooms for learners.

For teachers with disabilities to thrive, support must be real in our workplaces, accommodations, trained staff, and leadership pathways, not just words on paper.

- Ms Constantine Tuyishimire, Pre-primary teacher, Eastern Province, Rwanda

From Nepal, Shrikanta Sapkota highlighted the power of persistence and collaboration. Confronted with doubts from colleagues and school management about whether a blind teacher could teach effectively, he worked closely with students, mobilised peer support, used assistive technologies creatively, and ultimately improved academic outcomes. His presence challenges stereotypes about competence and showcases how teachers with disabilities model resilience and problem-solving for their students.

Policies exist, but without implementation they become barriers themselves; leaders still question our abilities instead of removing the obstacles we face.

- Mr Shrikanta Sapkota, Shree Sanskrit Secondary School, Kaski, Nepal

Génesis Abigail Martínez Ruiz, a trainee teacher from Mexico, offered a vision for future inclusive educators. She uses technology, games, music and play to create learning spaces centred on dignity, emotion and belonging. Her testimony reflected a teaching philosophy in which diversity is not merely accommodated but celebrated, drawing on her belief, echoing an inspirational quote, that what is essential in each learner “is invisible to the eyes.”

In the United Kingdom, Nicola Spearman, a deputy headteacher with a degenerative visual condition, spoke to the importance of representation in school leadership. She reframed her disability as a source of pedagogical and managerial strength, adaptability, empathy, creativity, and showed how leaders with disabilities can shift school culture. Under her leadership, disability awareness is now embedded in the curriculum, and students increasingly choose to share and advocate around their own disabilities. Her perspective affirmed that inclusive leadership is both possible and powerful when environments allow teachers to thrive.

Representation matters. When students see teachers with disabilities succeed, it reshapes their confidence and shows what inclusion truly looks like.

- Ms Nicola Spearman, Deputy Headteacher, The King John School, United Kingdom

Understanding the landscape: Global insights from research

To frame the dialogue, Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the University of Cambridge Nidhi Singal presented findings from her multi-year research since 2021 across 11 countries, examining the realities of teachers with disabilities working in mainstream schools. Her work underscored how little these teachers are represented in global data, policies, and even in people's memories of schooling when she opened the floor with "How many teachers with disabilities taught you in school?"

Yet teachers' experiences show consistent themes: inadequate institutional support, inaccessible materials and buildings, limited pathways for career progression, and continuing misconceptions about their competence.

Inclusion must extend beyond students to include teachers; the system too often fails them, leaving individuals to rely on informal support that should never be the default.

- Ms Nidhi Singal, Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

At the same time, her research revealed deep professional pride, sophisticated pedagogical creativity and an acute awareness among teachers of the social change their presence catalyses. Nidhi Singal described these educators as embodying pedagogies of justice and interdependence, offering education systems an often-overlooked resource for transforming teaching and learning. Their voices, she argued, must inform national reforms, international commitments and the evolution of teacher development frameworks.

What must change

Across all interventions, several shared priorities emerged:

- Inclusion must be practical, not aspirational. Policies are insufficient unless accompanied by accessible infrastructure, adapted materials, and funding for reasonable accommodations.
- Teacher training systems must prepare and welcome teachers with disabilities. Accessible materials, awareness training, mentorship and inclusive pedagogical models should be standard.
- Career progression and leadership must be open to all. Perceived and real barriers in recruitment, promotion and leadership pathways must be dismantled.
- School culture matters. Awareness-raising, dialogue on disability rights, and representation of teachers with disabilities can dismantle stigma and foster belonging.
- Data is essential. Many countries cannot say how many teachers with disabilities they employ. Without this data, inclusion cannot be planned, funded or monitored.

These priorities align closely with the [Santiago Consensus](#), the Teacher Task Force Strategic Plan, and [UNESCO's disability inclusion strategy](#) (2026-2029), yet the teachers' testimonies made clear that implementation is the missing piece.

Teachers with disabilities are not beneficiaries
of inclusion but drivers of it.

- Ms Justine Sass, Chief of Section for Inclusion
and Gender Equality in Education, UNESCO

A collective commitment

The meeting ended with a unified message: teachers with disabilities are not beneficiaries of inclusion but drivers of it. Their leadership, pedagogical creativity and unwavering commitment to learners point toward education systems that are equitable, diverse and resilient. Their voices, firm, practical and solution-oriented, should inform policy at every level.

The event also marked the launch of UNESCO's new resource, [How to build inclusive teaching and learning environments](#), a practical tool in poster format designed to support teachers and leaders in putting inclusion into action.

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Agenda

| Agenda | |
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| 13:30 – 13:40 | <p>Moderator: Ms Florence Migeon, Team lead for Inclusion in Education, Section for Inclusion and Gender Equality in Education, UNESCO</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p>Mr Carlos Vargas, Chief of the Section for Teacher Development, UNESCO, and Head of the Teacher Task Force (TTF) Secretariat</p> <p><i>The introduction will reaffirm the urgent global need to recruit and support many more teachers by 2030, as emphasized in the Santiago Consensus adopted at the 2025 World Summit on Teachers, which calls for renewed investment in teachers as the cornerstone of inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education to ensure quality education for all.</i></p> |
| 13:40 – 13:50 | <p>Setting the stage</p> <p><i>This session will highlight the voices and perspectives of teachers with disabilities working in mainstream schools across 11 countries.</i></p> <p>Ms Nidhi Singal, Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.</p> |
| 13:50 – 14:50 | <p>Moderated discussion</p> <p><i>Teachers from different regions will share their experiences in fostering inclusive teaching and learning environments. The panel will examine challenges in accessing the profession and obtaining adequate support and will highlight promising and innovative teaching practices.</i></p> <p>Moderator: Mr Purna Shrestha, co-lead of the Inclusion and Equity in Teacher Policies and Practices Thematic Working Group, TTF, and Lead Advisor for Education, VSO</p> <p>Speakers</p> <p>Mr Shrikanta Sapkota, Shree Sanskrit Secondary School, Kaski, Nepal</p> <p>Ms Constantine Tuyishimre, Pre-primary teacher, Eastern Province, Rwanda</p> <p>Mr Jovanie Destin Bakouatche, High School Teacher, Bepanda Bilingual High School, Douala, Cameroon</p> <p>Ms Genesis Abigail Matinez Ruiz, Student teacher, Escuela Normal de Especialización Humberto Ramos Lozano, Mexico</p> <p>Ms Nicola Spearman, Deputy Headteacher, The King John School, United Kingdom</p> <p>Q&A</p> |
| 14:50 – 15:00 | <p>Key highlights and concluding remarks</p> <p>Ms Justine Sass, Chief of Section for Inclusion and Gender Equality in Education, UNESCO</p> <p><i>The conclusion will invite all participants to continue championing the visibility, recognition, and empowerment of teachers with disabilities as leaders of change in education systems worldwide.</i></p> |

Biographies of speakers

Florence Migeon oversees the UNESCO program on inclusion in education and has over 15 years of experience in this field. She has developed several methodological materials and guidelines and has conducted many training workshops on issues related to inclusion, particularly in Africa and in Central and Eastern Europe. She has also had extensive experience in providing support to Member States in developing inclusive education policies, strategies and practices. She is passionate about human rights-based approach to development and education.

Carlos Vargas is the Chief, Section for Teacher Development, UNESCO, and Head of the Secretariat of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. He is a sociologist of education who specializes on global education policy. His research and publications focus on the relationship between education, human rights and well-being; the orientations and discourses of public policy and their effects on society. He has worked for universities, civil society, international organizations and local governments across the globe implementing lifelong learning policies and analyzing their intersection with equity, inclusion, and social justice. Since 2015, he works for UNESCO, where he has coordinated research on the social relevance and cultural pertinence of education in five continents and led the Organization's work on teachers, inclusion and lifelong learning in Latin America and the Caribbean. At present, he leads the Section of Teacher Development at UNESCO's Headquarters and the Secretariat of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030.

Purna Kumar Shrestha is an inclusive education specialist with 10 years of classroom teaching experience and school leadership, teacher training and has worked in the international development and education sector as a global education technical lead of VSO International. He is a member of the steering committee of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 and serves as a co-chair of Inclusion and Equity in Teacher Policies and Practices Thematic Group. Purna is also the Chair of the Executive Committee of UKFIET – The Education and Development Forum UK, which has a mission to create safe and open spaces where education actors from across the world, especially those whose voices are not normally heard, can come together (either in person or virtually) to debate different forms of education knowledge, build networks, and co-create ideas.

Nidhi Sigal is a Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education and Vice President of Hughes Hall College at the University of Cambridge. She has over two decades of experience of working on issues of inclusion across low- and middle-income countries, and her work has contributed to significant international policies and programmes. Her keynote draws on voices and insights from teachers with disabilities working in mainstream schools, across 11 countries.

Shrikanta Sapkota is an English language teacher at Sanskrit Secondary School and Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara, Nepal. Besides his teaching profession, Shrikanta is actively involved in advocating the rights of people with disabilities, particularly working with schools and local governments to ensure that learners with visual impairments have access to learning materials in Braille and in other accessible formats. He also serves as a member of the Pokhara Metropolitan City Disability Co-ordination Committee.

Constantine Tuyishimire is a nursery teacher in Rwanda. She has a physical disability. She teaches Nursery and grade 3. She has been teaching at Groupe scolaire Bufunda Tss (Technical secondary school in Nyagatare District).

Destin Jovanie Bakouatche is born in Limbe-Fako. He is a secondary and high school teacher of Life and Earth Science working at Government Bilingual High School Bepanda in Douala, Cameroon. This school is a member of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet). Jovanie has a physical disability with a paralyzed leg.

Génesis Abigail Martínez Ruiz is a Mexican student at the Escuela Normal de Especialización Humberto Ramos Lozano, currently in her seventh semester of a bachelor's degree in Inclusive Education. Living with OCA1 albinism, she has developed personal strategies to navigate visual impairment and light sensitivity, experiences that have strengthened her commitment to inclusion and accessibility in educational settings. She has completed professional teaching practices in preschool, primary, and secondary schools, and continues to build skills for inclusive educational intervention. Her training includes multiple courses on disability and inclusive pedagogy, and she actively promotes disability rights through artistic projects aimed at fostering respect and equality.

Nicola Spearman is a Deputy Headteacher of five years with over 19 years' experience in secondary teaching and leadership. She has a genetic condition called Stargardt's Macular Dystrophy which has resulted in central vision loss and eventually blindness. As a teacher and leader she has had to adapt her practice to ensure she is able to fulfil her job role to a high standard.

Justine Sass is the Chief of the Section of Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France. Over the past 25 years, she has championed gender equality, girls' and women's empowerment, and the right to education and health in posts at UNESCO and other UN bodies, non-profit organizations and U.S. government agencies. She believes that we all have a role to play in ensuring an inclusive and equitable society that leaves no one behind.