# The design flaw keeping children with disability out of school

EDITOR: As the new school year opens this February, for most children living with disabilities, it may be another year out of school.

Despite increase in school enrolments following the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme that peaked at 11 million in 2012/13, many children with disability continue to be left out. The Uganda Society for Disabled Children estimates that one third of all children out of school in Uganda are children with disabilities.

This makes them one of the largest minority groups in the out-of-school population. According to 2014 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) Census, 12.5% of the primary school age children (6 - 12 years) were not attending school. Based on UBOS midyear (2018) population projection of 7,873,800 for this age group, an estimated 984,225 primary school age children may be out of school. And a third of these out-of-school children (about 328,000) are likely to be living with disability.

One wonders how children with disability that constitute the largest minority group of children out-of-school get missed out or neglected by UPE, a programme that champions universal access for disadvantaged children.

Despite all other challenges UPE faces, the pointers are that the discriminatory formula on which UPE grant is based is a key design flaw at play.

The UPE capitation grant formula makes a flat-rate payment (of sh10,000) per pupil in the primary school. This flat rate inherently assumes no child has special educational needs.

Consequently, teachers and schools with higher concentration of children with disability get overwhelmed by the funding gap, particularly forcing teachers with special needs education speciality to move away due to work overload or failure to follow up closely on the children with special educational needs. Therefore, the children fall through the cracks.

Even with the meagre funding, a right formula for allocating UPE funds can make a big difference to children with disability in our schools. According to UNICEF, 60% of all children with disabilities could attend school with no special adaptations and 85% could benefit from education with minor adaptations.

This implies that majority of children with disabilities should be able to fit and study in ordinary schools, if we take note of them and their needs in the funding allocation.

However, this minor adaptations have literally not been forthcoming in the UPE schools due to the grant allocation formula that is skewed in favour of children without disability.

Time is ripe to review UPE, especially with regards to its dismal performance in benefiting the minority who need it most, but also the alarm sounded by 2016/17 Uganda National Household Survey that confirmed a significant drop in enrolment in the last five years. Any future discussion on funding for UPE should consider the flat rate for all pupils, plus additional payments per pupil with disability.

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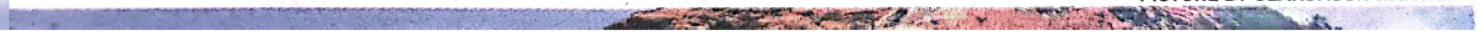
PICTURE BY OLANDASON WANYAMA



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