



**Experiences of inclusive education:
voices of learners with disabilities expressed
through art**

**Report on a Creative Arts Project
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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March 2022

Background:

Leonard Cheshire has been supporting inclusive education in schools in the Nyanza region of Kenya since 2017 through the Girls Education Challenge-Transition (GECT). The approach working at various education levels – primary, secondary and vocational - has been holistic and comprehensive, encompassing teacher training, community awareness and peer-to-peer support for learners with disabilities. As part of the process of evaluating its impact, towards close-out in March 2022, project staff sought to hear from learners themselves. The purpose of this initiative was to use art as a means of self-expression to portray how girls and boys with disabilities have experienced inclusive education and what this has meant to their lives.

Methodology

Fifteen schools were selected for inclusion in the Creative Arts Project, with five from each of the different levels. Following approval of the principal, teachers responsible for the Child 2 Child club were approached and provided with a set of basic art materials. They in turn invited learners with disabilities to participate in creating art pieces.

The process ran from mid-January – end February 2022. It included learners creating art pieces, then being interviewed regarding the meaning and significance of what they had created and (for some) presentation at LC close-out meetings. Two disabled young people (Citizen Reporters) were recruited as interviewers of the young artists. A total of 93 art pieces were created, using a wide range of media such as drama, songs, poems, clay modelling and painting. Notes on each of the interviews conducted, the videography script and photographs were analysed to determine key themes and messages being communicated through the art pieces.

Findings

Among the key messages conveyed by primary school children was that inclusive education means being together, playing together and singing together (a group performed a song in Sign Language). Clay modelling illustrated the facilities that enable such 'being together' viz, transport, accessible toilets, infrastructure and assistive devices.



Many of the secondary school learners chose to express themselves collectively through songs, drama and poetry. Among the dominant themes emerging was the contrast between before [inclusive education], when there was stigma and discrimination, and after [inclusive education] when there is acceptance and achievement. Song titles included “Wake up!” and “It’s time for disabled children to shine”. This theme was also reflected in a painting depicting inclusive education as

an old boot, previously thought to be useless and a thing to be discarded, transformed into something useful, of value and beautiful (see cover photo). Secondary school pupils also stressed the need for accessible environments and expressed their thanks for the support that they had received, not only from LC, but also from other partners, conveying how much this had contributed to their lives.



Students at vocational institutes used art to express their experience of inclusive education as being a means of motivation and inspiration. Their art illustrated how young people with disabilities have job opportunities and can contribute to their families and society – as teachers and hairdressers. However, they too expressed the need for accessible infrastructure and furniture and the importance of addressing prevailing prejudices that they experience from the community.



Presentations of the art pieces at close-out meetings gave the learners a platform on which to share their messages and was an opportunity for their voices to be heard directly by teachers, management, education officials and other stakeholders, generating a great deal of energy, enjoyment and engagement.



Learnings emerging

The overwhelming response from the artists was a clear indication that they have something to say! This confirms that art is a powerful means of self-expression for young people in respect of inclusive education, and that different art forms can be an engaging means of advocacy. Appointing young people with disabilities as interviewers for this project, served to be an effective way of enabling learners with disabilities to articulate their experiences of inclusive education.

Interestingly, none of the art pieces depicted teachers and the role that they play in inclusive education, despite this being one of the key interventions of LC. The researchers suggest that this is because learners take for granted the role that teachers play in ensuring that there is effective learning, with the art pieces focusing primarily on social inclusion.

Recommendations

It was evident from the art pieces that inclusive education became a reality for children with disabilities in the GEC-T schools, through the provision of resources and equipment as well as accessible school environments. In response to the question: *What would you do if you were President of Kenya for a day?* learners stressed the need to further develop and expand sustainable mechanisms to ensure that all learners with disabilities have access to education and that resources, equipment and accessible infrastructure become the norm for schools in Kenya. At the same time, there is a need to address barriers in the community that perpetuate discrimination against persons with disabilities.

Among the recommendations for schools emerging through this process, was the need to strengthen student-led clubs, which contribute enormously to an ethos of care and belonging. Further, use of art (including drama and poetry) is a powerful means by which learners with and without disabilities can express their experiences, aspirations and calls for action, which can be shared on a variety of platforms.