



INFORMATION BRIEF

Advancing Disability Inclusive Education with Special Education Centres

Introduction

Nearly a third of people in Syria have a disability, which is twice the global average.¹ The prevalence of disability is in part due to the prolonged violence of conflict and a collapsed healthcare system. For children, this severely impacts on their access to education as they face accessibility, inclusion and social barriers. According to an ACU survey, 85% of children with disabilities in northern Syria had dropped out of school, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support to ensure their access to education.²

As part of its commitment to strengthening disability inclusion in the education system, the Syria Education Programme II, locally known as Manahel, has established 50 Special Education Centres (SECs) in primary schools across northwest Syria. In doing so, the onus for inclusion and attendance at school is shifted from the child to the school system through the provision of multi-tiered support tailored to individual needs.

This Information Brief outlines how SECs are strengthening disability inclusive education in NW Syria and outlines recommendations based on learning for sustaining and scaling up support.

People with disabilities represent nearly a third of the Syrian population

What are SECs?

SECs are dedicated resource rooms that provide continuous, targeted support to children with disabilities with the aim of integrating them into mainstream education. They are specifically resourced to help children with learning difficulties who experience one or more cognitive processing disorders leading to academic challenges. Though they provide a separate learning environment from the main classroom, a core principle is that children should spend at least half of the school day with peers, where possible.

Resources within the SECs focus on improving academic knowledge and skills, building social interaction and communication, and providing psychosocial support. For example, the staff are trained to support children with behavioural and emotional difficulties, family challenges, health concerns and associated learning barriers such as low concentration or motivation.

Through individualised support plans, counselling sessions, family engagement and collaboration with external service providers, the SECs take a multifaceted and holistic approach to inclusion.

Manahel currently supports 50 special education centres or resource rooms (an expansion from 17 centres in 2021 and 34 centres in 2022). Each centre accommodates up to 10 students per academic year and operates through flexible models adapted to the specific needs of students and available resources.



“Manahel supported children with disabilities by establishing special education centres while no other entity provided such support. This help change community’s perspective on children with disabilities.”

Yasmin Gharibi – Special Education Teacher

Learner categories

Children attending SECs typically fall into three categories:

- **Full-time learners:** Children who are unable to integrate into mainstream classes.
- **Part-time learners:** Students who split their time between the SEC and mainstream classrooms, often accompanied (or shadowed) by Special Education (SE) teachers.³
- **Targeted intervention learners:** Children referred by class teachers for short-term or focused assistance, before returning fully to mainstream classes.

How SECs work in practice

Teachers and SEC staff work together with parents and learners to determine support required and implemented through a series of steps.

1. Identify support needs

An additional layer of support initially begins in the classroom with universal accommodations, such as adjustments to instruction, environment and modes of assessment. Children needing more targeted interventions are given access to the SECs through referrals by teachers, parents or caregivers, or an external partner.

2. Assessment and placement

Upon referral to the SEC, each child undergoes a comprehensive assessment led by a special education teacher using the Washington Group Questions⁴ to identify and classify their needs.

Together with the child’s family, the class teacher, headteacher and safeguarding officer (with a doctor consultation if deemed necessary), an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is formulated.

What are Individual Educational Plans?

An IEP is a personalised plan that outlines:

- Learning goals tailored to the child’s abilities and needs.
- Specific interventions and support strategies (e.g. teaching methods, accommodations, assistive technologies).
- Roles and responsibilities of teachers, specialists and caregivers.
- Progress monitoring to track improvements and adjust strategies as needed.

3. Implementation and monitoring

A classroom screening tool supports teachers to adapting the learning environments to meet the identified needs of children and provides a structured list of evidence-based accommodations that educators can select and incorporate into a child’s IEP.

SECs focus on cycle one education (Grades 1-4) and serve children aged 6 to 12 who experience learning difficulties, mobility challenges, hearing or visual impairments or non-severe intellectual disabilities.

Teacher professional development

All SE teachers receive specialised training and ongoing guidance from SE instructors along with additional technical support from the Manahel team. To ensure quality and continuous improvement, an **Assessment Tool for the Capacity of Special Education Teachers** evaluates across three core areas: attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills. Progress is tracked through initial and follow-up assessments to ensure SE teachers are equipped to deliver inclusive, effective teaching practices.

Community engagement

Each supported school has a community committee made up of teachers, local leaders and other stakeholders who actively promote school enrolment for children with disabilities via platforms including WhatsApp.

Parent Councils also conduct outreach activities, including visits to family homes, supporting centre operations and liaising with organisations to secure assistive technology (e.g., eyeglasses, hearing aids). This involvement has significantly strengthened community trust and enhanced parental understanding of inclusive education.

Recommendations

Manahel's holistic approach to inclusive education has laid the groundwork for long-term transformation in supported schools. However, there is great opportunity to scale up and sustain further policies and practice to support the education of all children.



Establish SECs in all schools to ensure consistent service delivery.



Scale up support for SE instructors.



Prioritise funding for disability inclusive aid and support.



Ensure rehabilitation of schools include the installation of accessible facilities.

“The progress observed in children with disabilities is the outcome of a collaborative effort between the special education teacher and the parents, working together to support the child's development.”

Dua Koja – Special Education Teacher

- 1 Humanity & Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.hi-us.org/en/nearly-one-third-of-people-in-syria-have-a-disability>
- 2 Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), survey. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/disability-northern-syria-prevalence-and-impact-october-2023-enar>
- 3 The Shadow Teacher's role includes helping the child maintain focus, participate appropriately in class, and work in an environment with many distractions. Another key area is building communication skills—encouraging the child to ask for help from the classroom teacher, share interests with peers, learn about their classmates' interests and initiate discussions. This approach helps the child focus on strengths rather than weaknesses, maintain a positive attitude toward tasks, experience success, recognise abilities and unique qualities and build self-confidence.
- 4 The Washington Group Questions assess difficulties in performing everyday activities due to health conditions across six core functional domains: vision, hearing, mobility (walking or climbing stairs), cognition (remembering or concentrating), self-care and communication.

Manahel, named from an Arabic word referring to fountains (of hope, knowledge and life), - is the northwest component of the FCDO-funded Syria Education Programme (SEP). Delivered by Chemonics UK, Manahel provides education to primary school-aged children and, since 2018, has benefitted over 600,000 children through school, home, and after-school education and by responding to children's psychosocial and protection needs.