

Disability Inclusive Data and Systems: Integration of the Washington Group Questions on Disability into the Annual School Census in Pakistan

Evidence from the DARE Research Consortium

Policy Brief

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ABOUT

This policy brief was produced by the DARE Research Consortium. It summarises the findings from a full report (forthcoming) detailing research conducted as part of the DARE-RC portfolio, and was authored by the researchers of that report. This brief forms a part of a series to provide actionable evidence to policymakers in Pakistan to improve education.

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Methodology

- **Documentary & quantitative:** analysis of the Data Standardisation Framework, ASC forms, and WG-SS data collected across all four provinces and ICT in 2023/24.
- **Qualitative:** key informant interviews and FGDs with federal/provincial stakeholders, headteachers and teachers at four schools in each province.

Key Figures

90%

of schools recorded zero children with functional difficulty

4/6

Washington Group questions integrated into the ASC

5

provinces and territories covered by the study

16

schools included in qualitative fieldwork

247x

gap between MICS and ASC walking-difficulty rates in Balochistan

2023/24

Annual School Census year analysed

Findings

1

Stakeholders value the collection of disability data

Inclusion of WG-SS questions was widely seen as a significant achievement and the result of considerable cooperation across levels.

2

Good quality data requires greater preparation time

Reported prevalence in the ASC is markedly below other datasets; 90% of schools reported no children with any functional difficulty.

3

Schools and teachers need adequate training and guidance

Time pressure limited training and guidance materials, so schools developed their own inconsistent approaches to the questions.

4

Stakeholders need capacity support to use the data

Federal and provincial respondents lacked opportunity to engage with the data effectively; teachers felt frustrated receiving no feedback.

5

WG-SS use can build awareness of inclusive education

Participation in data collection increased stakeholder awareness and appetite for training in inclusive education.

Policy Implications

- **Inadequate preparation time and limited training and guidance materials undermined the quality of data collected in this first round.**
- **Disability data from the ASC can help provinces identify inequalities in access, informing provincial Education Sector Plans.**
- **Many years of data maturation are typically required before new ASC indicators are strong enough to shape policy decisions.**
- **Stronger data can drive disability-inclusive budgeting and support Pakistan's SDG 4 and UNCRPD reporting commitments.**

Recommendations

COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Strengthen ASC Mechanisms

- Refine WG-SS implementation so forms and guidance are consistent with the DSF.
- Develop quality assurance processes at federal and provincial level.
- Empower teachers with clear guidance on completing WG-SS questions.

UTILISATION

Support Better Use of ASC Data

- Build stakeholders' capacity to interpret and use WG-SS data.
- Integrate disability data into Education Sector Plans and the PSDP.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustain the Disaggregated Census

- Sensitise stakeholders at all levels to the value of disability inclusion.
- Strengthen EMIS and invest in electronic, tablet-based data collection.
- Ensure robust quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms are in place.

Key Messages

In a significant commitment to disability inclusion, four of six Washington Group Short Set (WG-SS) questions – used globally to measure disability prevalence – were added to Pakistan's Annual School Census (ASC) for all provinces. This brief draws on research assessing how well the initiative has worked in practice.

The data collected so far significantly under-reports disability: 90% of schools recorded zero children with any functional difficulty, whereas other national data sources report high prevalence of disability among students. This gap reflects rushed form design and limited standardisation during rollout.

The under-reporting also stems from limited training and guidance materials for schools and teachers. Schools developed their own approaches, leading to considerable variation and, in some cases, disengagement from the questions entirely.

Even where data was collected, stakeholders at federal, provincial, and school levels often lacked the capacity to meaningfully analyse or act on it. Teachers were left frustrated when their reporting led to no response.

Simply participating in this data collection process created greater awareness of disability among teachers and stakeholders, along with a stronger appetite for training in inclusive education.

Sustaining this progress requires incorporating the two remaining WG-SS questions and investing in the underlying data systems so that disability data remains reliable over time.



Introduction

In 2023, the Data Standardisation Framework (DSF) for the Pakistan Education Management Information System (EMIS) was prepared by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training to support standardisation of data collected in the Annual School Census (ASC) across the provinces. In a significant demonstration of commitment to disability inclusion, the DSF stipulated the integration of four (of six) Washington Group Short Set (WG-SS) questions in Pakistan's school census. These questions measure difficulty functioning in four capabilities (seeing, hearing, walking and remembering or concentrating) among children attending mainstream public schools in Pakistan.

To support implementation of the Washington Group questions within the ASC, Sightsavers provided technical assistance at federal and provincial levels through development of data collection and analysis guidance and training of stakeholders. Subsequently, Sightsavers has conducted a research study to analyse the effectiveness of this initial experience.

The Data and Research in Education – Research Consortium (DARE-RC) aims to understand the challenges facing Pakistan's education system and explore potential solutions to these issues. This policy brief contributes to this by highlighting the value attributed to disability data by system stakeholders at all levels in Pakistan, and the importance of iterative work to strengthen collection and use of this data in future Annual School Censuses.

Study Methodology

The study adopted a sequential, mixed-methods design, to explore the nature and quality of the disability data collected by Pakistan's 2023/24 Annual School Census (ASC), and to understand the ways in which data collection processes, planning and implementation shaped the data collected. The study was conducted across Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), and all four provinces, with data collection in both urban and rural Lahore (Punjab), Karachi (Sindh), Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and Quetta (Balochistan).

Study methods included: (i) documentary analysis of the DSF and ASC forms and reports; (ii) quantitative analysis of WG-SS data collected in all public, mainstream schools in all four provinces and ICT; and (iii) key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders at federal and provincial levels, as well as headteachers and teachers at four different schools within each province.

Key Findings

1 Stakeholders value the collection of disability data

Qualitative data highlights that inclusion of WG-SS questions in the 2023/24 ASC was a significant achievement, and the result of considerable cooperation by stakeholders at all levels. For example, a stakeholder in Balochistan said:

4/6

**WG-SS QUESTIONS
INTEGRATED**

Added to Pakistan's Annual
School Census for all provinces

**“ Likely to be the largest-
scale use of the WG-SS
questions outside of a
population census. ”**

“Previously, we only knew if a child was disabled, but now we have more detailed data on the type of disability. This helps us identify specific needs and provide better support for disabled students.”

The study shed light on the enormous scale and scope of the undertaking – likely to be the largest-scale use of the WG-SS questions outside of a population census.

2 Good quality data requires greater preparation time and capacity

Quantitative work examined the reported prevalence of functional difficulty (FD), defined as children having a lot of difficulty in doing, or being unable to do at all, a particular activity. Analysis revealed that reported FD prevalence in the ASC was markedly below levels found in other datasets. The large majority of schools (90%) reported no children with any type of FD. Table 1 compares ASC results with other data sources.

Table 1

Children with Functional Difficulty per 10,000, by province and data source

Province	Data Source	Vision	Hearing	Walking	Remembering	Concentrating
Balochistan	ASC 2023/24	9	4	7	–	15
Balochistan	MICS 2019/20	230	20	1,730	80	70
KPK	ASC 2023/24	–	1	1	–	0
KPK	MICS 2018/19	30	30	320	100	80
Punjab	ASC 2023/24	4	3	3	–	38
Punjab	Singal et al., 2020	50	10	10	–	10
Punjab	MICS 2017/18	20	20	260	60	70
Sindh	ASC 2023/24	2	0	1	–	5
Sindh	Somani et al., 2020	105	66	158	–	350
Sindh	MICS 2018/19	40	10	660	50	30

Note: As MICS data is from the Child Functioning Module (CFM), remembering and concentrating are asked separately, using slightly different wording to the WG-SS.

Qualitative work highlighted that integration of the WG-SS questions into the ASC forms took place under considerable time pressure in provinces, and with relatively limited technical support. This resulted in challenges with form design. Data was not disaggregated by sex in Sindh and Balochistan, and a response category was omitted in KPK.

3 Schools and teachers must receive adequate training and guidance

Time pressure led to limited development and distribution of training and guidance materials for teachers and schools. Schools responded to this gap by developing their own approaches, resulting in considerable variability in practice. A teacher from Sindh shared this reflection:

“No, I didn't think they had any particular purpose. I assumed it was just a formality – something to complete and submit. The person who delivered the form didn't seem serious about it either.”

A teacher in KPK spoke about the impact of the lack of training on the data: “We weren't trained, so we didn't know how deeply we needed to assess. If children could read and listen, we assumed they were fine and always reported as NIL.”

4 Stakeholders need capacity support to analyse and utilise the data

The research shows that respondents at federal and provincial levels did not have the opportunity to engage with the data effectively, hence hindering its strengthening. Teachers and schools felt frustration and disengagement when they did not receive feedback in response to their submission of data:

“It made me so happy when I saw this [inclusion of the WG-SS questions] as these poor kids, who couldn't afford a medical treatment, were maybe going to be facilitated by the government... Their conditions are still the same, when they have a problem we note it down but there isn't any benefit.”

— HEADTEACHER, PUNJAB

5 Use of WG-SS has potential to support increased awareness and understanding

The research has highlighted that there is still limited awareness of disability among many stakeholders, and a limited understanding of inclusive education. However, multiple respondents spoke about how their involvement in this process increased their awareness of the importance and challenges in relation to inclusive education, and triggered an appetite for additional guidance and training. This has set an important foundation for a potential policy shift towards improved disability inclusion.

Policy Implications

While the inclusion of WG-SS questions in the ASC was a welcome effort, aligned with broader inclusive education commitments, the study showed that inadequate preparation time, technical weaknesses in form finalisation and standardisation, and limited reach of guidance materials and training undermined the quality of data collected. In some ways, this is not unexpected: whenever new indicators are introduced into an ASC it takes time for all stakeholders to understand how best to collect and use this new data. Ongoing work to advance maturation of the WG-SS data is essential, so that within a few years high-quality WG-SS data in the ASC can support wider policy decisions, through the following mechanisms:

Provincial Education Policies

Disability data from the ASC will help provinces identify inequalities in access and education progress, in line with the 2024 National Education Policy Development Framework (NEPDF).

Education Budgeting & PSDP

Continuous improvements to data accuracy will ensure provincial governments make appropriate disability-inclusive budgetary allocations. Sindh and Punjab have already increased school-level allocations.

Education Sector Plans

“Equity and inclusion” is a key principle guiding the provincial Education Sector Plans (ESPs); it is essential the ASC includes disability data to enable more appropriate responses in each ESP.

SDG & UNCRPD Reporting

The ASC is a key source for Pakistan's SDG 4 progress and UNCRPD reporting, enabling the Government to report progress in line with the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’.

Recommendations

Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE), Provincial Education Departments, and District-level education officers need to ensure effective disability disaggregation throughout the ASC collection and reporting process.

1. Strengthen Mechanisms for Collection and Analysis of Disability Data

- **Federal and provincial level (led by PIE):** Strengthen guidance on WG-SS data collection, analysis and reporting; refine implementation so forms and guidance are consistent with the DSF; develop quality assurance processes; integrate the two remaining WG-SS questions; develop Technical Working Groups on Inclusive Education involving OPDs.
- **District and school level:** Empower teachers to play a well-defined role in WG-SS data collection, including clear guidance reaching teachers (many expressed preference for video or app-based content) and quality training on identifying functional difficulties.

2. Support Better Utilisation of ASC Data in the Education Sector

- **Build capacity (led by PIE):** Ensure individuals involved in data analysis, interpretation and use receive relevant training; engage Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) to raise awareness and ensure appropriate access to disability data.
- **Inform policy:** Integrate disability data from the ASC into Provincial Education Sector Plans and the PSDP; improve inter-ministerial coordination and capacity-building.

3. Ensure Sustainability for the Disability-Disaggregated Census

- **Sensitise stakeholders:** Provide pre-service and in-service training to teachers on inclusive education; share examples of how schools have used WG-SS data; engage with OPDs, learners with disabilities and their families to combat stigma.
- **Strengthen data systems:** Continue to promote standardisation and institutionalisation of disability-disaggregated data within EMIS; invest in electronic, tablet-based data collection and individual learner-level records.
- **Sustain benefit & quality assurance:** Develop mechanisms to ensure schools and teachers benefit from data collection through feedback; ensure robust quality assurance and monitoring at federal and provincial levels.

Conclusion

The integration of the WG-SS questions into Pakistan's Annual School Census (ASC) represents a pivotal step towards realising the country's commitments under the UNCRPD and Sustainable Development Goal 4.5. As shared by a participant in a federal interview: "Notably, this framework aligns definitions and processes with SDG 4. Furthermore, for the first time, the Washington Group's questions were incorporated into the ASC questionnaire, a significant addition previously absent."

The use of a standardised tool, such as the WG-SS, along with teacher training and clear data collection guidance, will help to reduce under-reporting and support inclusive education planning. However, ongoing strengthening of ASC data collection processes, as well as capacity for data analysis, interpretation and use is still needed. This study has identified and highlighted key areas for attention in support of stronger and sustainable inclusion of disability data in Pakistan's education data systems.

For More Information

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More information about the DARE-RC Programme: <https://darerc.org/>

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