
Social Inclusion of Students With Intellectual Disabilities: Global Evidence From Special Olympics Unified Schools

Special Olympics Global Center
for Inclusion in Education

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**SPECIAL OLYMPICS
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FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION



Students participating in Special Olympics Unified Schools programming in Kenya

About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education began in 2020 as a conceptual framework: it would serve as a centralized resource of support for the expanding network of Special Olympics Unified Schools with their three components of school-based Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement. The foundational goal of the Global Center is to illuminate, broaden, and intensify the impact of the 2019 World Games in Abu Dhabi by driving targeted, grassroots change for social inclusion across the globe using the Middle East and North Africa Region as a foundation. This includes serving as a hub for evaluation research on inclusive programming, as well as for basic research on the development of inclusive mindsets across cultures. To help achieve this goal, the Center will support a series of research and policy briefs on topics critical to inclusion in education. These briefs will bring Special Olympics experts together with thought partners in the research and policy fields related to education and youth development and their intersection with Unified Sports programming.

About the Authors

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Introduction

In every corner of the globe, learners with intellectual disabilities (ID) face multiple challenges stemming from social exclusion and active isolation by educational institutions—challenges that can extend into adulthood and become barriers to employment.¹ For young people with ID, negative attitudes towards their disability are among the most frequently cited barriers to inclusion, second only to others' lack of knowledge about ID.² Social isolation, high levels of stigma,³ and bullying characterize this exclusionary behavior, resulting in inequities in educational access. This inequitable access in turn has a negative impact on the progress of students with disabilities and on the overall quality of their education as they struggle to participate in meaningful learning due to an inability to feel secure in their school environment.⁴

Exclusion also deprives youth *without* disabilities. It deprives them of the opportunity to learn from a more diverse set of peers, preventing them from developing skills they need in order to contribute fully within a global economy and society. Youth of all abilities must develop core skills around acceptance of diversity and communication across differences if they are to function and succeed in a world that increasingly requires multicultural understanding and competency. These core skills include social-emotional skills that are essential to both school and workforce success.⁵ A recent survey of employers found that 40 percent reported a lack of social-emotional competencies, often referred to as “soft skills,” amongst young people entering the workforce.⁶ Therefore, challenging attitudinal barriers and promoting the social inclusion of students with ID are crucial to supporting the healthy development of all youth, as evidenced by positive school experiences and longer-term professional success.

The multi-pronged question arising from this discussion is: How do we convene young people with and without ID to address these challenges together, how do we know whether or not our efforts to change negative attitudes toward youth with ID are succeeding, and how do we determine whether our programming actually makes a difference in promoting social inclusion and fuller access to education? To ferret out some actionable answers, Special Olympics undertook an evaluation of one of its flagship intervention programs—Unified Schools—as it operates in four selected countries. This brief presents the findings of that evaluation, called the Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study (usually referred to in this report as simply the Study).

Through targeted support in 14 countries and territories, Unified Schools has engaged nearly 200,000 youth by providing opportunities for young people with and without ID to participate in a wide range of sporting activities and events. The Unified Schools model creates regular opportunities for the implementation of Unified Sports®, which brings together similarly apportioned teams composed of members with and without ID who train and compete against each other. The evaluation results highlighted in this brief describe the impact of the Unified Schools model on the social inclusion of youth with ID in four countries served by Special Olympics.

What Is Special Olympics Unified Schools?

Special Olympics Unified Schools is a co-curricular model that uses the inclusive sports model, Special Olympics Unified Sports, as a platform to promote meaningful social inclusion by bringing together young people with and without ID to lead in the creation of accepting school environments. The Unified Schools program

aims to foster sustainable, long-term change and ultimately create a school climate and culture where all students feel accepted. The goal is to facilitate healthy relationships among students with and without disabilities by engaging them in inclusive sports, where they can work together across differences.

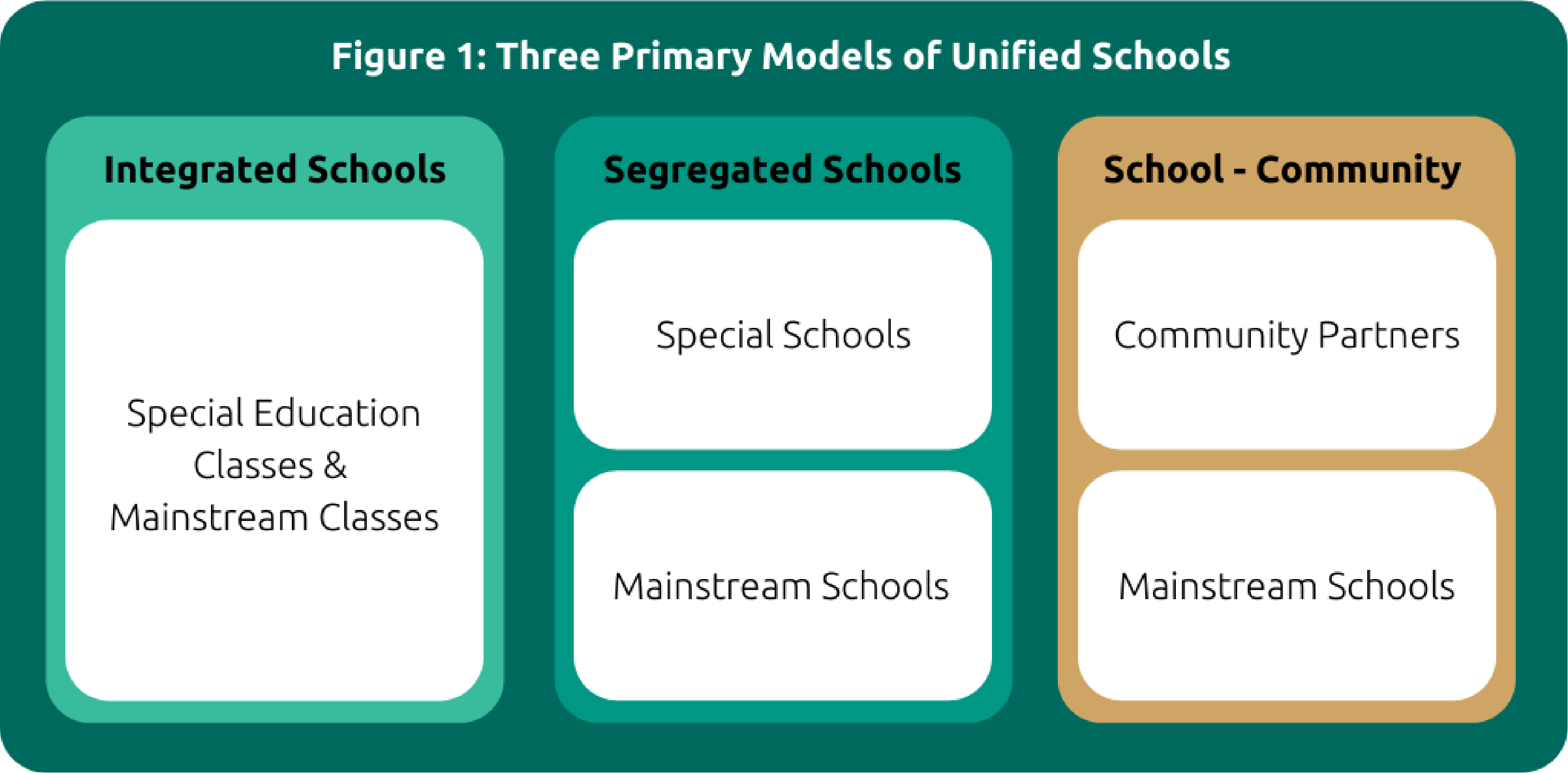
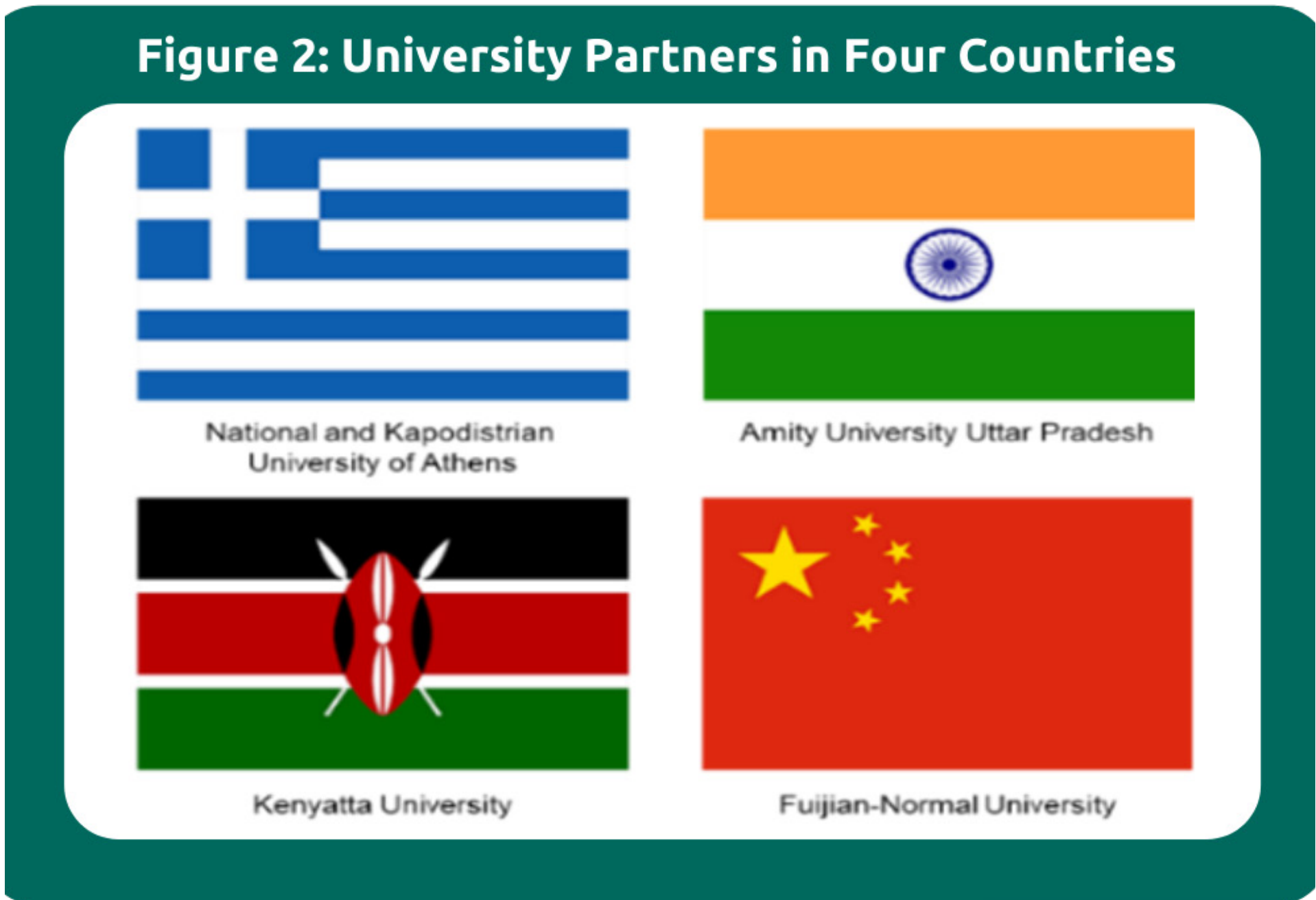
Despite the steady progress in improving global social inclusion, many countries still operate school systems that are largely segregated for students with disabilities, especially students with ID. In order to be responsive to the realities of education access for students with ID, Special Olympics has developed three primary models of Unified Schools programming. Depending on a country’s educational system, the Unified Schools model may be adapted in any of the following ways: (a) in the *Integrated Schools* model, the program is implemented in schools that serve students both with and without ID; (b) in the *Segregated Schools* model, the program is implemented through a partnership between a mainstream school for students without ID and a special education school for students with ID; and (c) in the *School–Community* model, the program is implemented through a partnership between a mainstream school and community partners who serve youth with disabilities (Figure 1).

More than a decade of ongoing evaluations of the Unified Schools program within the United States have shown positive impacts at both the school and student levels. For example, 95 percent of schools report that the program creates a more inclusive school environment, and 85 percent of participating students report learning how their emotions and attitudes affect others and the importance of standing up for their beliefs.^{7,8} Students participating in Unified Schools report significantly improved attitudes toward peers with ID and improved perceptions of school social inclusion, as well as increased social interaction with peers with ID.

However, few studies have been conducted on the implementation or impact of Unified Schools outside the United States. In order to effectively scale Special Olympics Unified Schools globally, it is critical to understand the extent to which the model can be adapted to suit the contexts of different countries and whether the model has similar impacts across this diversity of settings and local adaptations. To help address this need, the Social Inclusion Study examined the impact of Unified Schools in four countries that are part of Play Unified: Learn Unified—a multi-year initiative supported by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

Play Unified: Learn Unified

Play Unified: Learn Unified has offered an unprecedented opportunity to adapt and expand Unified Schools to a wide range of cultural contexts and education systems. The evaluation Study focused on four countries in the Play Unified: Learn Unified project: China, Greece, India, and Kenya. These countries were selected because they represent a variety of geographic regions as well as diverse models of Unified Schools implementation. In partnership with four local universities (Figure 2), a two-year formative evaluation



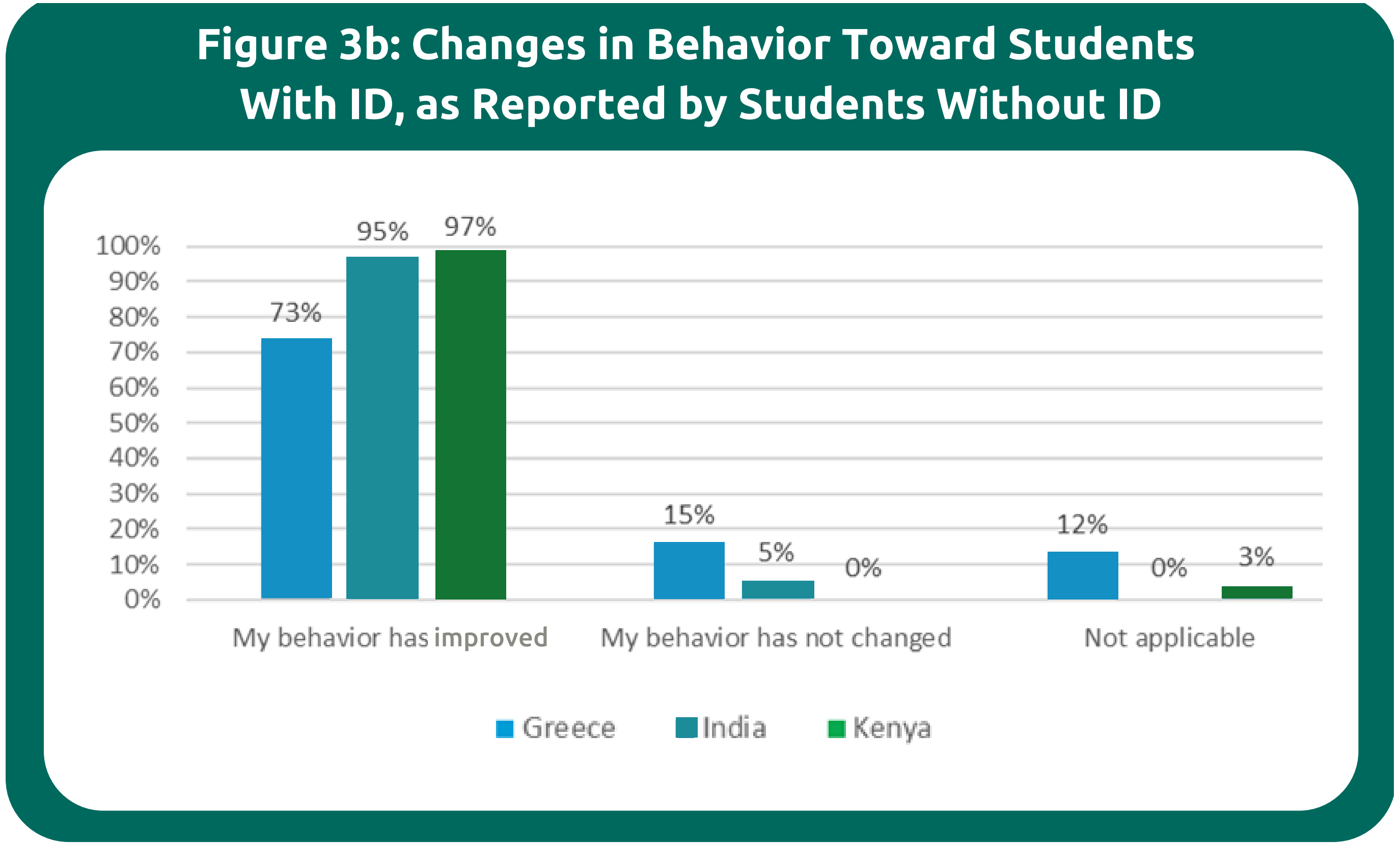
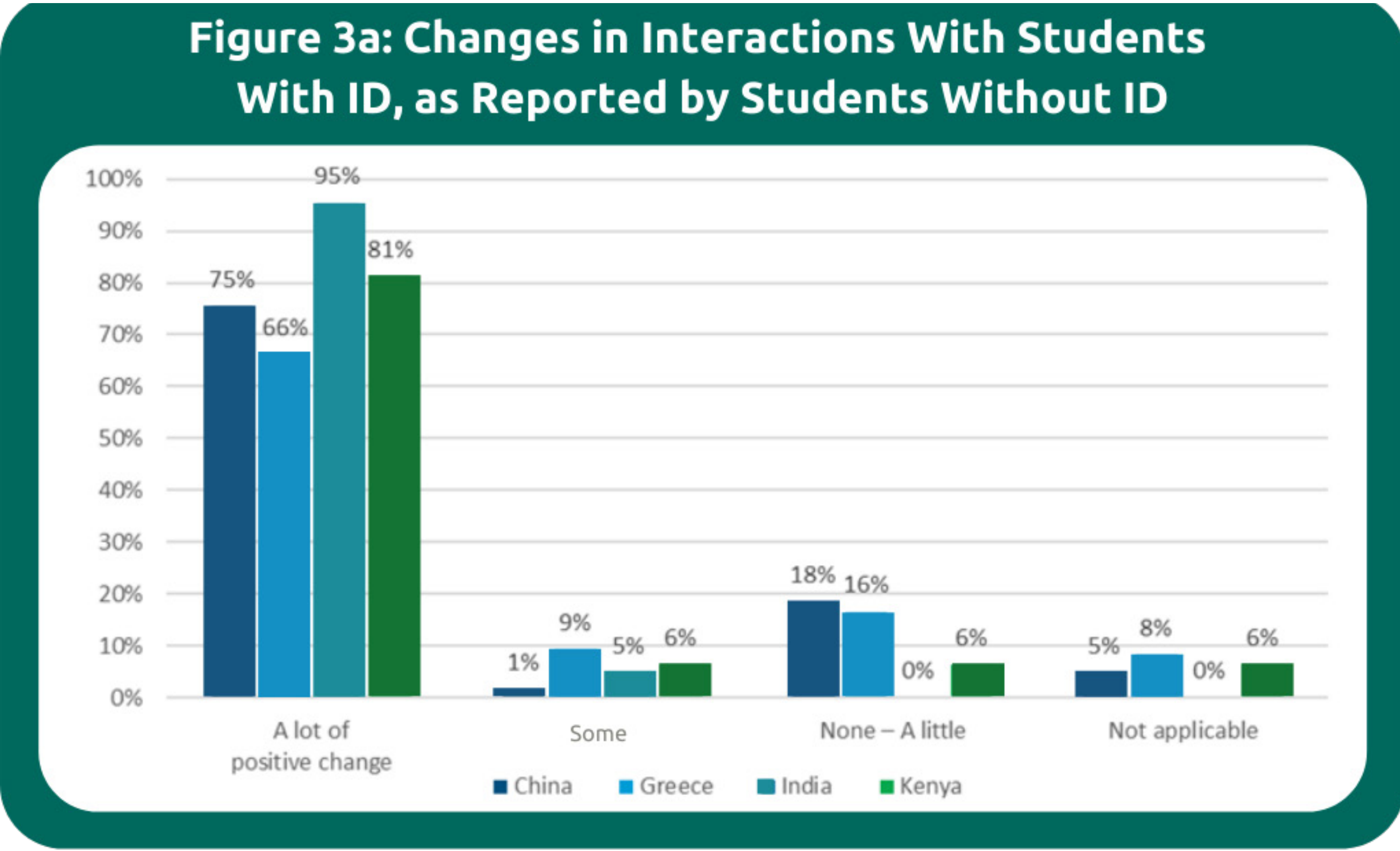
was conducted in each of the countries to evaluate the relationship between participation in Unified Schools and students’ awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards social inclusion and school climate change, as well as their development of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills.

Though the effect size varied across the participating countries, students with and without ID reported improved social-emotional skills, especially relative to managing relationships and social awareness.⁹ Not only did results indicate large positive changes in social-emotional skills, but students without ID reported overwhelmingly positive changes in interactions with and behavior towards students with ID. Positive effects extended to indicators of school culture and climate—including reductions in bullying, teasing, and offensive language—as well as greater awareness of social inclusion as measured by a sense of community and students being proactive in helping others in their school.¹⁰ The most striking finding illustrated that Unified Schools can mitigate and reverse the negative attitudes of peers without ID, which are a leading barrier to students with ID being able to experience inclusive school communities and learning environments. These results suggest a promising path forward to better understanding the long-term impact of inclusive programming on students’ development and behavior towards others, particularly when the students extend their inclusive mindsets (attitudes and behaviors) beyond the schoolhouse to the surrounding communities. Findings in all three of these areas—social-emotional skills, school climate and culture, and the social acceptance and inclusion of students with ID—are outlined below.

Inclusive Mindsets: Creating Opportunities for Shared Experiences

One of the most important goals of Unified Schools is to improve the interactions and behaviors of students without ID toward their peers with ID. As demonstrated by evidence in a range of contexts, negative attitudes among students without ID are a leading barrier to positive interactions and behaviors towards students with ID.¹¹ Prior research also reveals that these attitudes can be changed significantly by creating shared experiences where those with and without ID work together and learn from each other.¹²

Across the four countries included in this evaluation Study, participation in Unified Schools programming was found to correlate with improved interactions between students with and without ID. Importantly, students without ID overwhelmingly reported that after program participation they experienced a substantial amount of positive change in their interactions with students with ID (Figure 3a). Students without ID also reported dramatically improved behaviors toward their peers with ID (Figure 3b).



In Greece, where a more in-depth analysis was conducted, students with and without ID reported that the Unified Schools program fostered positive attitudes, knowledge, empathy, friendship and

citizenship. Attitudes such as these are essential building blocks in creating socially inclusive schools for all students, where differences are celebrated as strengths.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews provide further insight into these findings. Parents and caregivers of students both with ID and without ID noted that the attitudes of students without ID reflected greater sensitivity and devotion toward students with ID after participation in the Unified Schools program. Both groups of parents and caregivers also shared that Unified Schools promoted a feeling that students with ID were not different. In addition, parents and caregivers of students with ID shared that their motivation for allowing their children to participate in Unified Schools was a desire for them to experience activities with exposure to peers with and without ID. As discussed in greater detail below, such experiences are instrumental in building the mindset essential to cultivating skills and competencies that are fundamental to creating healthy school and community settings where all young people can learn and develop.

School Climate and Culture and Awareness of Social Inclusion

When you walk into a school with a healthy climate and culture, you see students and staff who are caring, respectful, and committed to each other, their school communities, and the broader world. In these schools, such values are not just posters on the walls. Rather, they become part of the living, breathing fabric of the school, permeating day-to-day interactions and instructional practices. Students, educators, families, and the community all play a role in co-creating an inclusive school culture. The result is a learning setting that promotes the academic performance and social-emotional development of all students—both with and without intellectual differences.¹³

For students with and without ID, as well as for school personnel (teachers, coaches, and administrators), the Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study showed a positive correlation between program participation and improved school climate and awareness of social inclusion. As Figure 4 reveals, 86 percent of students with and without ID in India positively rated the impact of the Unified Schools program on increasing the sense of community in the school. In Kenya the results were even more impressive. Nearly 100 percent of students with ID and nine out of ten students without ID indicated that Unified Schools increased a sense of community in their schools. Across both countries, strong results were also revealed for reducing bullying, teasing, or use of offensive language in school and for helping students within the school. While the changes were rated highly by both groups of students, it is interesting to note that in every category but one, a higher proportion of students with ID than

Figure 4: Students’ Perceptions of the Impact of Unified Schools on School Climate and Social Inclusion

Responded: "Quite a bit" to "Definitely"		
	Students with ID	Students without ID
India		
Reducing bullying, teasing, or use of offensive language	70%	62%
Increasing the sense of community in the school	86%	86%
Helping other students within the school	81%	76%
Kenya		
Reducing bullying, teasing, or use of offensive language	97%	88%
Increasing the sense of community in the school	97%	90%
Helping other students within the school	97%	91%

students without ID perceived a positive change, perhaps indicating the personal significance of Unified Schools’ programming benefits for historically marginalized students.

School personnel corroborated these student reports of the impact of Unified Schools on school culture. Over 80 percent of participating teachers, coaches, and administrators in India and nearly 100 percent in Kenya reported an increased sense of community in their school after involvement with Unified Schools (Figure 5).

Figure 5: School Personnel’s Perceptions of the Impact of Unified Schools on School Climate and Culture

India	Responded: "Moderately" to "Significantly"
Increased sense of community	83%
Provided more sports opportunities	71%
Promoted student leadership	75%
Increased student confidence	83%
Kenya	
Increased sense of community	97%
Provided more sports opportunities	68%
Promoted student leadership	100%
Increased student confidence	100%

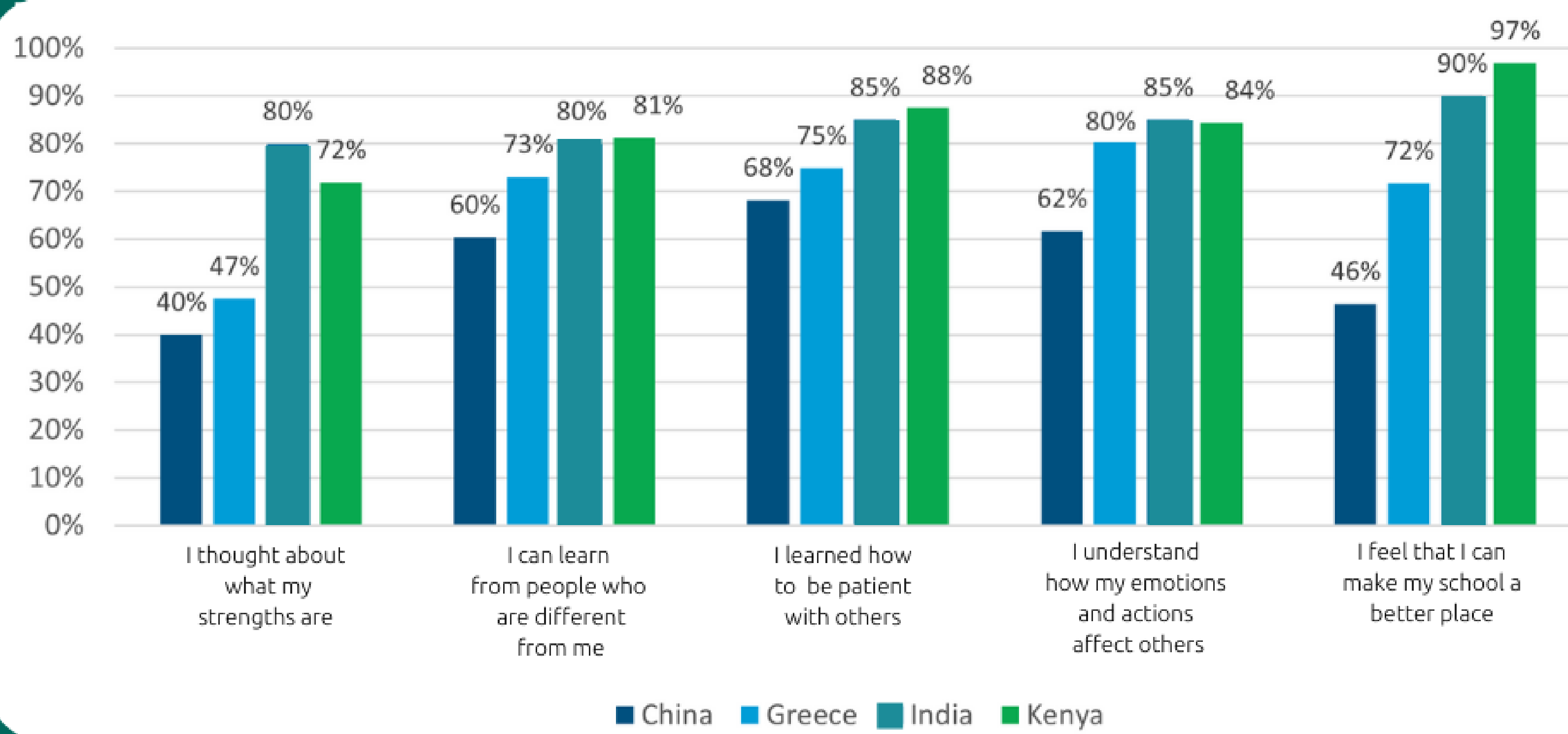
These findings are particularly significant because of the diversity of schools participating in the project. Many of the schools that were surveyed do not have an integrated schools model, meaning that students with ID are placed in separate schools. In India, educators in the general education schools described the Unified Schools program as fostering a more inclusive school environment and promoting positive changes in discipline in the schools, which in turn contributed to an improved school climate. They also remarked that the program fostered trust and politeness among participating high school students and that the relationships among students in the mainstream schools had improved. In fact, all educators interviewed indicated that their schools developed more inclusive environments as a result of participating in the Unified Schools program.

Social-Emotional Learning

A large and growing body of evidence demonstrates that social-emotional skills and competencies are a critical component of human development and lead to improved outcomes in school, career, relationships, and emotional well-being.¹⁴ Results from the Social Inclusion Study of four countries confirm that students with and without ID who participate in Unified Schools report positive changes in social-emotional skills. As depicted in Figure 6, across the four countries studied, students *without* ID reported having high levels of multiple social-emotional skills after participating in Unified Schools.

Again, a more in-depth analysis was conducted in Greece and the results were particularly striking. Students without disabilities were asked to

Figure 6: Assessment of Own Social-Emotional Learning Skills After Unified Schools Participation, As Reported by Students Without ID



rate themselves twice—pre- and post-participation in Unified Schools—on four social-emotional skills, such as being patient with others. As depicted in Figure 7, the analysis reveals that after participation in the Unified Schools program, students were 9.45 times more likely to choose a higher rating on whether they can learn from people who are different from themselves; 10.03 times more likely to choose a higher rating that they learned to be patient with others; 16.07 times more likely to choose a higher rating in terms of understanding how their emotions and actions affect others; and 9.57 times more likely to choose a higher rating on whether they can make their school a better place. These results indicate that significant growth is likely to occur in students’ social-emotional skills during the time they participate in Unified Schools.

These findings were underscored by qualitative focus groups in Kenya where parents indicated that their children benefited from participating in the Unified Schools program through improved social-emotional competencies. During the focus group discussions, one of the parents candidly reported, “My child’s hyperactivity and fights [have] reduced.” Other parents expressed similar views with such comments as:

“My child is able to interact with other children, even at home.”

“My child is now exercising, empathetic, and very considerate.”

“My child has gained self-control.”

These observations were echoed during interviews with school educators. As a school staff member at a participating school in India observed, “Students have become more confident, and secondary relation[ships] between others have also improved.”

Implications for Policy and Practice

Special Olympics believes that the scaling of our vision for schools and communities of inclusion begins with a global policy agenda. In fact, one of the universal truths of education is that the scaling of high-quality practice depends largely on the enabling conditions created by policy. The experience of Special Olympics over the past two decades speaks to the role that policy plays in creating environments that make meaningful inclusion possible for people across the world. Our research enhances the empirical evidence that when governments commit politically and financially to policy agendas that support inclusion, inclusive practices flourish as young people with and without ID transform school settings into communities of acceptance and inclusion. This transformative power of Special Olympics programming is evident in such diverse contexts as the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Morocco, and Chile, where governments committed both politically and financially to policy agendas that support inclusion.¹⁵ Short of a policy agenda that calls on governments to commit both politically and financially, a future that “leaves no one behind,” as declared by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, will be difficult to envision, let alone attain.

The findings of this research point to three critical implications for policymakers and other authorities in the realm of education. These needs are: (a) to address underlying attitudinal barriers faced by students with disabilities, (b) to promote experiential and inclusive social-emotional learning programs, and (c) to enable practitioners to deepen their impact through evidence-based interventions such as Unified Schools.

Address Underlying Attitudinal Barriers to Inclusive Education

As previously discussed, a major driver of the continued exclusion of learners with disabilities from formal educational opportunities is some individuals’ negative attitudes towards disability of any kind. The Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study shows that providing students without ID with regular and repeated opportunities to interact with their peers with ID in inclusive programming helps develop more inclusive attitudes and behaviors. This finding is significant in that it demonstrates how interventions such as Unified Schools and organizations such as Special Olympics could serve as implementation partners for education leaders seeking to address attitudinal barriers as they strive to make their systems more inclusive.

Promote Experiential and Inclusive Social-Emotional Learning

For generations, sports-based experiences have shown themselves to be an effective setting in which to teach social-emotional skills. This Study suggests that a co-curricular, sports-based, and disability-inclusive intervention can effectively cultivate social-emotional skills in youth across cultural contexts. In fact, the Study supports the robust finding in the broader research that sports-based experiences are one of the most effective settings for teaching social-emotional skills. It is notable that positive SEL outcomes were seen in students both with and without

disabilities, demonstrating one of the Study’s most important findings: the benefits of shared experiences in building inclusive mindsets and social-emotional skills is not limited to just students with disabilities. In other words, disability inclusion is not only a matter of equity; it also benefits the overall development of human capital. This finding should be awarded crucial consideration for policy discussions as education systems worldwide work to implement more disability-inclusive education policies and establish international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Enable Technical Assistance for Implementing Evidence-Based Interventions

Although Unified Schools was first developed and evaluated in the United States, this Study shows that the theory of change on which the model is based has global relevance. Promoting a positive school climate and culture and facilitating healthy relationships among students with and without disabilities can be achieved by engaging them in inclusive sports, where they can work together across differences. Importantly, results indicate that programming can be localized and adapted to fit a variety of cultural contexts and education systems while achieving similarly positive results. This adaptability is particularly key for those countries working to implement inclusive programming through partnerships between mainstream and special education schools in systems that are still predominantly segregated.

Concluding Thoughts

It is critical that promising practices developed within one country’s context can be adapted to fit different cultural contexts, and that these adaptations be rigorously studied to see how the effectiveness of different interventions does or does not hold across countries. Evaluations

of the Unified Schools program in the United States have shown that participation in the program by students without ID resulted in improved attitudes toward their peers with ID, improved perceptions of school-based social inclusion, and increased social interactions with students with ID. Now, this Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study—the first global evaluation of the model—has attained similar results in sample populations from China, Greece, India, and Kenya, lending support for the expansion of the Unified Schools model internationally. The field of inclusive education lacks international empirical evidence with rigorous designs and needs a better understanding of the mechanism behind how social inclusion correlates with learning and long-term human capital accumulation. Our Study presents a research-grounded collaborative model that can be replicated in other countries and contexts.

Not only does this model develop international evaluation capacity and enable global partners to collect high-quality implementation data, but it helps to support policy decision-making that is research-based and data-driven. Education systems around the world are striving to measure up to the obligations enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that reference disability, specifically in those aspects related to education. The Unified Schools program is uniquely positioned, as an evidence-based strategy that brings together students with and without ID, to help governments realize the SDGs by meeting the needs of those students with ID while enriching the learning of all participants.

The findings of this study are even more timely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of which has been particularly devastating on our children with disabilities who experienced disproportionately difficult impacts in terms of

educational inequality. Students with disabilities experienced longer school closures, and as a result were more likely to regress academically, more likely to suffer physical and mental health challenges, and more likely to be overlooked in government and school responses to the crisis.¹⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for new ways to ensure education systems are accessible and inclusive for all. At the same time, this worldwide health crisis has underscored the needs all students have to develop social-emotional skills. By providing inclusive experiences to play and learn together, the Unified Schools program addresses not only the needs of learners with ID but also the needs of students without disabilities. It builds a platform for collaboration among stakeholders across systems to reach the ultimate goal of empowering youth of all abilities with the skills they need to create and thrive in a more inclusive future.

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Endnotes

1

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2

Banham & Papakosta, 2018

3

Scior et al., 2020

4

World Health Organization, 2011

5

Jones & Kahn, 2018

6

Manyika, 2017

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Jacobs et al., 2018

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Siperstein et al., 2017

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Yin et al., 2021

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Yin et al., 2021

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For further reading please see Nowicki & Sandieson (2002) for a meta-analysis of research studies published from 1990 to 2000 examining attitudes toward children with disabilities. The authors conclude that children without disabilities generally preferred to interact with children without either physical or intellectual disabilities. In a related study of upper school students, McDougall et al. (2004) examined the attitudes toward students with disabilities and found the majority had attitudes classified as neutral to positive, but slightly over 20 percent had negative attitudes.

12

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13

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