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Education of Children with Disabilities: Need for Greater Reflection

In recent years, changes in legislation, as reflected in the Persons with Disabilities Act and the Right to Education Act, have provided a much needed focus on the education of children with disabilities. However, conflicting goals and a lack of clarity still affect young people’s experiences and outcomes of education.

While educational enrolment figures for children with disabilities remain highly contested, with figures ranging from less than 4 per cent to 67.5 per cent attending school, there exclusion from education is of concern. NSSO (2003) figures indicate that only 45 per cent of people with disabilities are literate in comparison to 65 per cent of the total population. Progression and retention rates remain dismal. World Bank (2007) noted that only about 4 per cent of children with disabilities receive more than 8 years of schooling, and they are five times more likely to be out of school than children belonging to scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. Even in states with good overall educational indicators, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, their situation is far from adequate. This raises the question about what is amiss in a context where some commentators have argued has the most progressive disability policy frameworks.

Over the years, government has funded special schools through grants-in-aids (under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) and integration in mainstream schools through programmes, such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development). An important shift was undertaken in the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (2007: 1), which adopted a ‘zero rejection policy’ irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability. The aim was to teach a child in an environment suited to his/her learning needs, which might include special schools, Education Guarantee Scheme, Alternative and Innovative Education or even home-based education. While this multi-option delivery model could be immensely useful, a number of assumptions underpinning the government’s discourse need to be challenged.

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In policies and practice, deterministic viewpoints about children’s ability viewpoints remain largely unchallenged and naïve statements about where to educate children with disabilities exist. For instance, the MHRD, 2003 document, provides a list of children who can be taught in the mainstream, and the important variables for doing so are IQ score and the nature of impairment. Furthermore, the overarching emphasis in such a scenario is on identification, through assessment teams “comprising of a psychologist, a doctor and a special educator” will determine whether the child should be directly enrolled into a ‘normal’ school” (as noted in the Tenth Five Year plan). Noticeable here is not only the absence of the views and preferences of the child and parents, but there is also a complete disregard of the fact that such objectification and medicalization of disability is highly limiting.

Not surprisingly, issues of access and location remain paramount in discussions and little regard is given to the quality of classroom based processes. The lack of teacher preparation and training in responding to the needs of children with disabilities is noted even by the National Council for Teacher Education (2010:12), which reflects on the “inadequate preparation of teachers to address diversity in the classroom”. Additionally research evidence is growing in relation to the challenges faced by teachers. The discussions in this article draw on the writer’s experience of researching and working in the area of special and inclusive education over the last 14 years. The research evidence quoted in this article is specifically drawn from a qualitative community based study with 30 young people with disabilities, their families and other stakeholders in Madhya Pradesh (2005-2010). In Singal et. al., (2009) mainstream teachers working in government schools in rural and urban Dewas noted their lack of training to respond to the needs of children with disabilities and the challenge of working in large class sizes with little resources. Interestingly, these accounts are no different from those of teachers working in more urban and better resourced private schools in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. However, this is not surprising given that teachers own experiences are shaped by their (inadequate) training and (limited) experiences, which are far from adequate, hence putting in place a vicious cycle of compliance and lack of creative engagement.

Furthermore, the discourse around the aims of educating those with disabilities is itself anchored in limiting assumptions about their role in society. As an example it is useful to draw a contrast between a NCERT (2006: 23) report which notes the goals of education as: “Creation of vital links between experiences at home and community, Self-knowledge, Creativity and exploration”. While the(Draft) National Policy on Special Education notes, “In developing curricula for children with special needs stress shall be laid on the development of compensatory, vocational, and social skills” (RCI, 2001, emphasis added). Such a statement begs important questions about compensation for what? Whereas the focus on vocational skills gets translated into carpentry, candle making, and other low skill endeavours, with little economic potential.

Such narrow perceptions about the purpose of schooling stand in contrast to the views which are held by young people with disabilities and their families. Recent research in India highlights that education is a priority even for parents with children with disabilities and in some cases they are equally willing to make the investment in private education. Similar findings were reported in the World Bank study in rural Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Parents of children with disabilities equated education with increased employment prospects for their child, leading to a better quality of life than they had. More significantly, young people with disabilities who had attended school for 8 years or more, discussed the impact of schooling in terms of developing a positive self, related it to notions of respect and dignity, development of basic skills such as reading newspapers, accessing information on public transport, and heightened sense of independence. As a young woman noted, ‘Education can make a person independent and stay in society with some amount of dignity’.

While young people valued education they were also very reflective of the struggles they encountered in their educational journeys. These experiences provide interesting reflections on issues of location. Most of the young people had truncated journeys where they moved from special to mainstream or vice versa, from government to private schools or vice versa, which were due to
various push factors rather than by choice. In mainstream schools their experiences were heavily shaped by high levels of frustrations arising from lack of adequate resources (e.g., Braille), a restricted school curriculum, and lack of classroom participation. In such a scenario children with disabilities seemed to be resilient survivors of a flawed system, rather than the system fostering their success.

Even though the last few years have seen an increased focus on the education of children with disabilities, fundamental issues remain in relation to how differences are understood and responded to in the Indian context. In India, the strong association between poverty and disability cannot be disregarded. Various epidemiological (and other) studies highlight the high incidence of preventable diseases causing impairments. By focusing on issues faced by people with disabilities not only is one amplifying the socio-historical marginalization of this group, but also engaging with the contemporary realities of Indian poverty. It also acknowledges the need for proper health care and the need for aids and appliances. However this should not detract from the need to continually and critically examine barriers that society places on the participation of those with disabilities.

Additionally, efforts have not been shaped by a systematic examination of existing needs and realities. Rather the focus has been a piece meal approach on one hand, and the adoption of international rhetoric on the other. An interesting example in case of the latter is how ‘inclusive education’ is currently propagated as the solution to all problems, within many non-governmental circles. This is done without any clear articulation of the what, how and why specifically in relation to the Indian context. Emerging evidence from many Southern countries highlights the inadequacies of uncritically adopting such decontextualized rhetoric, especially when propagated through the use of indexes and training modules developed by researchers based in the North who have no experience or understanding of our context. Of even greater concern is the fact that there is no realisation that even in a country like Britain (a country from where we continue to import many concepts and ideas in this field) the Conservative government when elected to power (in 2011) expressed the following views in its very first official document on. ‘We will remove the bias towards inclusion…we will also prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools by giving parents and community groups the power to take them over’ (DfE, 2011: 5, emphasis added).

In our efforts towards educating children with disabilities there is a need for greater acknowledgment of the challenges in our mainstream education where fundamental concerns exist, such as teacher attendance (not qualification); competence in basic skills (not developing innovative pedagogical approaches); scarcity of clean laboratories (not high-tech laboratories); and the baggage of colonial legacy with competing demands in a globalised era. Unarguably, the approaches adopted to respond to the education of children with disabilities must acknowledge and address these dissonances. Thus simply stating that all children must participate in the existing fractured education system would not necessarily be a socially just approach.

Furthermore, as we work towards developing an educational system capable of accommodating greater human diversity, we must be creative in our undertaking. The need is to develop ‘value free’ transition points between different educational streams (special, mainstream etc), and where the participation in one system will not stigmatisate learners for life. While there is no argument against the fact that all groups of children should be provided access to a learning environment which is engaging and empowering, it is still not clear how this is best achieved.

Debates in the field of special and inclusive education continue to draw on Northern literature, unquestioned assumptions and oversimplified generalisations. For too long there has been a complete silencing of the voices of these with disabilities in reflecting on their educational experiences and helping chart the future course of direction. These key stakeholders must be provided spaces (intellectual and physical) to be heard and listened to. It is only when we truly begin to develop a deeper appreciation of the context and make efforts to understand individual and collective stories that we can open up the moral and political space for effective educational reform efforts, rather than putting in place fragmented solutions.

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YOJANA April 2013