Education of Children with Disabilities in India
A Critique

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Illiteracy levels are high across all categories of disability and very high for children with visual, multiple and mental disabilities compared to national averages. Generating awareness that the disabled have full rights to appropriate education in mainstream schools and that it is the duty of those involved in administration at every level, including schools, to ensure that they have access to education is of utmost importance.

Post-Independence India has witnessed phenomenal changes in the area of education but they do not cover education for the disabled. In fact, we are left asking if education for the disabled has acquired the much-needed attention and initiative. With widespread development in the form of globalisation and industrialisation, do children with disabilities have adequate access to education?

The raising of such questions does not necessarily imply that nothing has been done for these students. It only highlights the need to initiate more efforts to execute those plans. It is rather pathetic that children with disabilities still constitute one of the largest groups that fall outside the fold of the general education system.

Policy Developments

Analysis of government documents shows marked variations in the provisions envisaged for different marginalised groups. The scheduled castes/scheduled tribes (SC/ST) have had a strong political lobby since Independence and this is reflected in the provisions made for them. Article 46 of the Constitution makes a straightforward commitment to promoting the "special care and education" of SC/ST populations, whereas Article 41 referring to children with disabilities, states: "The State shall within the limits of its economic capacity and development make effective provision for securing the right to work, old age, sickness and disablement." The clause, within the limits of the State's economic capacity and development, greatly reduces the expectation of urgent action that is seen in Article 46. Such a caveat has had a significant impact on the national planning process.

Over the years, the government has launched various programmes and schemes to meet its commitments towards the education of children with disabilities. Among the first of these was the project integrated education of the disabled children (PIED) launched in 1987 in collaboration with UNICEF, in 10 blocks in 10 states and union territories across the nation. Taking note of the outcomes and recommendations of the PIED, the integrated education for disabled children (IEDC) scheme, which was initially launched in 1974, was subsequently revised in 1992. The IEDC currently covers 15,000 schools and has enrolled a total of 60,000 children (RCI 2000). With India becoming a signatory to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), the 1990s saw the rapid incorporation of the term "inclusive education" in various official documents, reports published by institutions such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and media.

The focus on inclusive education was adopted by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP 1994). The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA 2007) extended the dual approach historically adopted towards the education of children with disabilities, by propagating a "multi-optional delivery system". It categorically brings the concerns of children with disabilities, or those it terms as "children with special needs" (CWSN) under the framework of "inclusive education" (IE):

> Despite various efforts in the recent past, both the rates of educational participation and outcomes of education remain very poor for children and young adults with disabilities. Illiteracy rates for this group remain much higher than the general population and school attendance continues to lag behind that of non-disabled peers.

Access and Enrolment

Based on National Sample Survey (NSS) data, the World Bank (2007: 64) report categorically states that

> it is very clear that both educational attainment of all PWD (persons with disability) and current attendance of CWD (children with disability) are very poor and far below national averages.

Data suggests that people with disabilities have much lower educational attainment rates, with 52% illiteracy against a 35% average for the general population. It is important to note that illiteracy levels are high across all

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categories of disability, and extremely so for children with visual, multiple and mental disabilities (and for children with severe disabilities across all the categories).

Apart from the inconsistencies in estimates regarding the total population of people with disabilities in India, there are large discrepancies in the number of CWD identified between census data, school-based records through District Information System for Education (DISE), and Project Approval Board survey aggregates used by the SSA. According to estimates made under SSA, around 1.5% children in the 6-14 age groups have special needs, while the 2001 Census data indicates the proportion to be around 2.2%. The picture is more confusing when examined across the states where differences between identification rates are much higher. While some of these discrepancies could be attributed to different definitions, perceptions and indeed training of the enumerators, they certainly raise concerns about the effectiveness and reliability of the identification procedures.

Moreover although the issue of identification of CWSN has been of main focus in the SSA and the reports note a steady increase in their numbers (Table 1) suggesting that there is growing awareness of their concerns, assumptions underpinning the process of identification and assessment need to be critically examined.

Table 1: Identification of CWSN

Year	Total Numbers Identified as CWSN
2002-03	6,83,554
2003-04	14,59,692
2004-05	15,92,722
2005-06	20,17,404
2006-07	23,99,905
2007-08	26,21,077

Source: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2007).

Moreover the SSA documentation does not provide a definition of the CWSN other than assuming that this group is synonymous with children with disabilities and all disabilities give rise to a need for special education. The SSA in its category titled "Special Focus Groups under SSA" does not acknowledge the presence of intersectionalities between the various groupings and how they need to be addressed.

Despite numerous arguments about learning taking place in an "appropriate"

environment, there is lack of critical reflection on the nature of this appropriate environment and about who decides where the child needs to be placed.

Apart from the unreliability of data on the educational participation of children with disabilities in terms of estimates in the schoolgoing age group, much discrepancy also exists in the numbers actually attending school. Mukhopadhyay and Mani (2002) in a NCERT survey suggested that about 84,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in schools in 1998; and unpublished data gathered for the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) suggested that approximately 55,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in schools in 1999. In addition to this, despite "the Office of the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities stating that not more than 4% of children with disabilities have access to education", the MHRD claimed in 2004 that 1.08 million children with disabilities were being educated. By using a very low estimate of the total number of children with disabilities, they arrived at an estimate of 67.5% of children with disabilities receiving education (MHRD 2004). Data on children with disabilities in elementary classes collected under DISE reveals that their number varies from year to year. In the year 2003-04, there were 1.75 million such children as against 1.40 million in 2004-05. However, their number has always remained around 1% of the total enrolment in elementary classes. In 2006-07, about 1.42 million children with disabilities were enrolled in elementary classes across the country, of which 1.04 million were in primary and 0.38 million in upper primary classes. The percentage of children with disability, in primary, is 0.79 and in upper primary 0.80 of the total enrolment in these classes. The corresponding percentage at the elementary level is 0.80.

Table 2 indicates the differences in enrolment according to the type of disability. Almost one in every three children with disabilities in elementary classes has some problem in moving (28.56%). About 24% are visually handicapped, 12% hard-of-hearing, 12% disabled in speech, about 17% are mentally retarded and 7% have other types of disabilities.

There are some interesting differences evident as children make the transition from primary to upper primary classes. Compared to 20.79% of children with visual impairment in primary classes, their percentage in upper primary classes is as high as 32.87%. On the other hand, figures for children with mental retardation show a significant decline in numbers.

Thus, across levels of severity, irrespective of the nature of disability, a shared picture of lack of progress beyond primary school emerges starkly.

Table 2: Enrolment According to Type of Disability

Disability in	Grades		
	I-V	VI-VIII	I-VIII
Seeing	20.79	32.87	24.02
Hearing	11.69	11.04	11.52
Speech	13.04	8.28	11.77
Moving	27.28	32.09	28.56
Mentally retarded	19.68	8.62	16.73
Others	7.51	7.10	7.40
% to total enrolment	0.79	0.80	0.80

Source: DISE 2006-2007.

More recently, there have been growing concerns regarding the type of schools attended by children with disabilities and implications for their integration into society. DISE data does not provide information regarding enrolment figures in special schools. The NSS reveals that in urban areas around 11% of those with disabilities in the 5 to 18 years age group were enrolled in special schools, while this was less than 1% in rural areas. This reflects the recent growth in the number of special schools, especially in urban areas. However, these special schools have certain disadvantages which became evident as their number increased. These institutions reached out to a very limited number of children, largely urban and they were not cost effective. But most important of all, these special schools segregated the CWSN from the mainstream, thus developing a specific disability culture (Janshala 2003: 1).

Efforts at integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools have been even less successful. Although the IEDC scheme provides for a wide range of incentives and interventions for the education of children with disabilities including preschool training, counselling for parents, allowances for books and stationery, uniforms, transport, readers

and escorts, hostel facilities, other assistive devices, one special teacher for every eight children with disabilities, community involvement, and a resource room in a cluster of eight to 10 schools,

Table 3: Enrolment of Disabled Children in Schools under the Integrated Educational Programme (Stage: Primary)

Area	Management	Type of Disability					
		Visual	Hearing	Orthopaedic	Mentally Retardation	Others	Total
Rural	Government	1,539	1,307	15,168	1,066	2,070	21,150
	Non-government	391	354	2,189	188	80	3,202
	Total	1,930	1,661	17,357	1,254	1,250	24,352
Urban	Government	896	1,420	5,072	1,694	1,382	10,464
	Non-government	982	1,877	3,959	800	1,538	9,156
	Total	1,878	3,297	9,031	2,494	2,920	19,620
Total	Government	2,435	2,727	20,240	2,760	3,452	31,614
	Non-government	1,373	2,231	6,148	988	1,618	12,358
	Total	3,808	4,958	26,388	3,748	5,070	43,972

Government includes the central government and the state governments as also local bodies and non-government includes pvt aided and pvt unaided.
Source: NCERT (1998).

Table 4: Enrolment of Disabled Children in Schools under the Integrated Educational Programme (Stage: Upper Primary)

Area	Management	Type of Disability					
		Visual	Hearing	Orthopaedic	Mentally Retardation	Others	Total
Rural	Government	996	533	6,734	369	926	9,558
	Non-government	262	264	1,582	67	141	2,316
	Total	1,258	797	8,316	436	1,067	11,874
Urban	Government	604	904	3,781	271	251	5,811
	Non-government	736	581	2,293	572	1,467	5,649
	Total	1,340	1,485	6,074	843	1,718	11,460
Total	Government	1,600	1,437	10,515	640	1,177	15,369
	Non-government	998	845	3,875	639	1,608	7,965
	Total	2,598	2,282	14,390	1,279	2,785	23,334

Government includes the central government and the state governments as also local bodies and non-government includes pvt aided and pvt unaided.
Source: NCERT, 1998.

much is left to be attained. Apart from these a number of voluntary organisations are also making attempts towards implementing the scheme in the various states. Tables 3 and 4 show the number of students with various forms of disabilities enrolled under the integrated educational programme.

Aids and Appliances

In both, DPEP and SSA considerable attention has been given to the provision of aids and appliances. The SSA (2003) provides a one-page "List of aids and appliances required by children with special needs" for four impairment types – visual, hearing, orthopaedic and intellectual. These aids and appliances are largely directed towards equipping the child's functioning (day-to-day and educational), through the provision of aids such as white cane, hearing aid and thick pens. This document also notes the provision of Rs 500 to teachers to develop low cost teaching and learning materials to meet the educational needs of a CWSN in a regular classroom. SSA (2007) notes the increased distribution of aids and appliances to children with CWSN (Table 5). The main focus however remains on the distribution of wheelchairs, crutches, braces, etc.

While provision of these is indeed very useful and enhances the functional capacity of many children, again these statistics give an incomplete picture. Various problems were found to be associated ranging from difficulty in accessing the provisions, as rehabilitative services tend to be concentrated in urban areas, and the devices given were inappropriate, difficult to repair and maintain in rural areas.

Training of Teachers

A majority of the school personnel are not adequately trained to design and

Table 5: Distribution of Aids and Appliances

Year	Distribution of Aids and Appliances to CWSN
2003-04	1,21,467
2004-05	2,86,922
2005-06	3,70,397
2006-07	7,11,971
2007-08	8,32,828

Source: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2007).

implement educational programmes for students with disabilities in schools. There is currently no pre-service training offered to regular teachers which familiarises them with the education of the CWSN; the focus is only on providing in-service training. Although the SSA envisages training of the teachers, an analysis of the content merely covers issues of identification and management. Even the number of teacher training courses is low. As of 2005 less than 0.2% of all SSA teachers had been through this larger programme (quoted in World Bank 2007), raising concerns about the effectiveness of such programmes affecting pedagogical practices.

Critical Reflections

Globally there is a conscious shift away from special schooling to mainstream schooling of education for children with disabilities. In view of this it should be our objective to make mainstream education not just available but accessible, affordable and appropriate for students with disabilities. It is true that by making our schools accessible to children with disabilities, we will also be able to improve the quality of education for all children which is a key objective of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

At the very outset it is important to review implementation of existing programmes, provisions to identify factors leading to success or failure of the drive towards enrollment and retention of children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings.

Accessibility to educational institutions remains a major hurdle for students with disabilities. Thus it is necessary to adopt precautionary measures to ensure physical access for children and youth with disabilities in schools and educational institutions to a barrier free environment by enforcing the requirement for provisions of universal design in buildings and provide support in transportation. Supporting the entire process of inclusive education also requires the need to address issues of curriculum and pedagogy. It is significant to mention here that institutions such as the NCERT are addressing this issue and it has set up a group under the National Curriculum Framework Review (2000) to examine

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the pedagogic inputs and classroom re-organisation required for the education of children with special needs.

There is also the need to put in place an effective communication and delivery system for specific delivery of teaching/learning material, aids and appliances, hardware/software to the students with disabilities.

It will be possible to successfully implement integrated educational programmes only when regular school educators are trained on a mass scale. There is the inevitable need for designing some innovative models to train teachers using unconventional training methods. In view of the enormous diversity (socio-economic, linguistic, etc) in India great care must be taken in identification of specific content to be included in the training programmes. The curriculum for pre-service training programmes needs to be carefully designed based on basic skills, professional knowledge, communication and interaction skills, knowledge about assessment techniques, resource management, etc. Provisions need to be made for appropriate resource services support through appointment of special educators, rehabilitation professionals, provision of resource room, etc, to support mainstream schoolteachers in the classrooms.

There should be appropriate mechanisms to ensure a system of regular feedback and monitoring. The government clearly needs to do more than just enact legislation and announce action plans. It must put enforcing and monitoring mechanisms in place. An action plan for making education disabled-friendly by 2020, announced by the MHRD in March 2005, sets no interim targets. There is need for greater and more focused collaboration among different administrative units for streamlining efforts towards effective implementation of the integrated educational programme.

While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continue to be the sole players in the delivery of special education through grants-in-aids received from the government, their involvement needs to be actively sought in efforts towards changing the role of special education centres and meeting the goals of mainstreaming. Thus there is a need and growing urgency to examine the role, purpose and quality of provision offered by these organisations.

Generating awareness in the general community, persons in the education field and more specifically among parents and children with disability that the disabled have full rights to appropriate education in mainstream schools and that it is the duty of those involved in administration at every level including schools to ensure that they have access to education definitely needs immediate notice.

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) in their country-level analysis of elementary education note that while certain states have taken steps to identify children with disabilities and provide for them in regular schools there is considerable variation in efforts. For instance, Himachal Pradesh began a push towards integrated education in 1999-2000. A total of 25,476 children have been identified as CWSN which is 2.34% of the total schoolgoing population at elementary level. At present, 23,011 of these have been integrated in mainstream schools and those out of school (2,465) are being brought into the system using different strategies, such as alternative schooling, etc. Similarly, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have also given high priority to the integration of CWSN into regular schools. Most of these piecemeal efforts have significantly pointed to the imperative need to move beyond redistribution to reorganisation. The current approaches which are largely directed towards identification of more children, transforming special schools into resource centres, or even shifting children to mainstream settings, are inadequate.

The focus needs to shift from the outside to the "inside". We need to be concerned about what children are being offered in these educational settings and its relevance to the lives they would like to lead.

However, whatever and whichever be the initiatives undertaken it is important for us to raise a few pertinent questions and seek the answers to them as early as possible. Is mere launching of various schemes and programmes enough for the development of children with disabilities? Does the educational system in actual terms cater to their needs and problems or are they mere attempts towards the attainment of target goals for the proposed plans and policies? Are children with disabilities actually benefitting from the educational programmes? Is quality as important as numbers enrolled? Are we really sensitised towards children with disabilities?

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