



**BARRIERS TO  
EDUCATION - A Note**

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### **INTRODUCTION – DISABILITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

It well known and oft quoted that disabled children have five and a half times the chance to be out of school than non-disabled peers<sup>1</sup>. Further, to put a figure to this information, out of the 72 million children out of school across the globe, 24 million are children with disabilities with the numbers increasing as we speak<sup>2</sup>. With statistics as alarming as this, the fact that education of disabled children is not in focus, seems contradictory.

*Mr. Venkateshappa, a disabled person from Andhra Pradesh, India expresses this hopelessness clearly when he says –*

*“We have a cow which in the morning goes for grazing. If the cow does not return by 6 in the evening, one of my family members goes in search of the cow because it gives milk! But no one comes in search of me even if I do not return home for few days!??”*

Across the world, the most invisible and the hardest to reach are children with disabilities. Their health and nutritional needs as well as their basic educational needs are an immediate necessity to ensure some hope of rehabilitation. The alternate picture is to have 24 million and counting disabled youth out in the world with no education, no means of secure livelihoods and with high risk of abuse, discrimination and neglect.

Inclusive education is the first step towards building an inclusive society with acceptance of all persons and their

diversities. This process entails building the right environment to promote inclusion, strengthening the capacities of all stakeholders involved, promoting participation to ensure sustenance of the program and mutual sharing and learning to complete this holistic picture.

### **OUR WORK**

Leonard Cheshire Disability has been working in the area of inclusive education for the past decade and has set up working models of the system to serve as best practices. The model has been especially successful in countries such as Kenya & Sierra Leone in Africa and in the South Asia region.

The South Asia Regional Office (SARO) has ten education projects operating in the four focus countries of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The projects have pioneered the work of inclusive education in the area and are currently reaching out to over 3628 disabled children, 1414 parents, 2504 teachers and 421 schools<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from ‘Education of children with disabilities in India – Dr. Nidhi Singhal, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Data from EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010 ‘Reaching the Marginalized’

<sup>3</sup> Data as on March 2010

The projects follow a rigorous identification, service provision and follow up model with capacity building of all stakeholders being key to the success of the program. The projects staff identifies children with disabilities in the target area and provides the children with assessment and therapy support. This has been noticed to be very crucial for the development and education of the child. The project in Rajshahi division Bangladesh, has reported that children who have developed their daily living skills and have been given therapeutic support are more likely to continue going to school. Children who have gone through speech therapy and counseling have been found to learn and perform better in schools. The physiotherapy support extended has a direct impact on the movement of the child and thus enables the child to commute to school and to participate in school activities.

The next step is to work with the family members and the larger community to ensure that they are supportive of the child going to school. The fears and questions of the parents are addressed and their capacity is built to provide therapy at home and to monitor the development of the child. The parents are then encouraged to take active interest in the child's education and socialization. The larger community is made aware of the rights of the child and it is ensured that the community is cooperative towards the family. Wherever necessary, community help is secured to ensure that the child is not discriminated or abused in any form.



Children's club at Coorg, India

The projects have a very innovative approach of setting up parents groups and children's clubs. The parents groups share experiences and solutions and give each other the confidence to fight for the rights of their children. Parents groups have also been very successful as in our Mumbai, India project to negotiate with the school authorities and gain enrolment for their disabled children. Children clubs have been a very successful model with inclusive clubs

being set up to participate in extra curricular activities, share experiences, play together and socialize. This approach has made path-breaking progress and is being implemented widely.



Barrier free school at Nagapattinam, India

The next step in our program is to identify schools in the local area for the children. We first work with the school authorities and make them sensitive to the educational rights of a disabled child and aware of their responsibility in this regard. Once the cooperation of the authorities has been secured, the school is then made accessible with available means. Our projects in places such as Galle, Sri Lanka and Arushi, India have built model schools that are completely accessible to serve as a prototype

for others. In many cases the projects do not have many resources and they use local materials and innovative solutions to address these issues. In Bangladesh for example, the project staff has used bamboo to make a support railing for the disabled children to use the toilets.

An important step is to next work with school teachers and to train them to meet the needs of inclusive education. Training programs and refresher courses are held and teaching learning material is provided. The best way to reach out to large numbers of teachers is to go through the local government teachers' training body as has been done by our projects in Arushi, India and Coorg, India.



Teachers training, Galle, Sri Lanka



Sensitisation programme for local government officials, Prakasam, India

To ensure that this project is sustainable, the project staff has to work with the local government authorities as well. These include officials of the social service/welfare and the education departments. Working with them ensures that we maintain a good rapport with the local government schools. Furthermore, a good equation with the government officials also ensures that the entitlements of disabled children in the project, such as disability certificates, scholarships and pensions are easily made available to them and their families.

The projects also maintain a good rapport with civil society members who assist in keeping the larger community sensitive to the needs of the disabled children. This has been successfully done by the projects in Bangladesh and Pakistan where the support of the village leader or religious head can make an immense difference to the work of the project. Good networking with other organizations ensures that medical and referral services are provided at lesser cost and better quality to all children.

The work done by each individual project is complemented by the networking and advocacy work done by the regional office. Publications and articles make a difference and provide information to all interested in knowing more about the concept. Through this initiative, the mandate of inclusive education remains fresh in the minds of the policy makers and the larger community.

***FROM THE FIELD – Razak Coorg, India says -***

***"I used to find it very difficult to go alone anywhere. Thanks to Cheshire Homes India Coorg I was able to learn Braille, Mobility Orientation and received all the assistive devices. I received all the support from them to complete my education. They gave the Government order to the school, so that I could get a scribe for my exams. With their help I was able to enrol in the local College and was supported for the fees.***

***Today I have been able to stand on my feet, and have received so many opportunities that I could have only dreamt of, due to the efforts of Cheshire Homes India Coorg."***

## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Through the rigorous process of setting up inclusive education projects and reaching out to over 20,000 disabled persons across the region, the SARO education program has met and surmounted a number of barriers. Yet there are some that continue to remain as larger issues that affect the lives of thousands of disabled children and deny them their right to go to school.

*Vedavathy, mother of a disabled child from Coorg, India says - "My son - Danush, could not access education as he is visually impaired. When the school was approached the teachers felt that he would be a disturbance for the others and will not be able to follow the lessons.*

The greatest barrier lies in the minds of people. Education of disabled children continues to be looked at from an individual or medical point of view where the child is looked at as a problem and attempts are made to adjust the child to the situation. As a result, schools continue to refuse admissions to children with severe disabilities on the pretext that they cannot cope in school. Inclusive education instead takes an alternate approach where it focuses on the system as needing adaptations and the rights of the child as the basis of intervention.

To make matters worse, the lack of skilled professionals and teachers have made quality service provision to disabled children very difficult. Trainings to teachers can be provided but specialized skills such as sign language and Braille need more time and constant practice. The best method to reach these technical subjects to a large number of teachers is to include these elements in the curricula of the local government teacher training program. Through this, the intervention would have a government directive and thus would become mandatory in all government schools.



Inaccessible class room, snapshot of a video by Young Voices Member, India

Within schools, the lack of accessibility and the poor infrastructure have resulted in basic facilities such as toilets and water being unable to all children. It has been noted that in many cases, disabled children especially girl children do not go to school since they are unable to use the toilet facilities. Schools also do not have good quality accessible educational material for the children to learn and the teachers to use. This decreases the

motivation and interest levels in all and makes learning difficult.

Rigid curricula and assessment systems make the education process very closed and non-flexible. There is little scope for a child to learn and experiment and for a teacher to make changes to suit the needs of a child. Above all, most schools have skewed teacher student ratios with one teachers handling over 60, sometimes 80 and in some extreme cases as many as 110 children<sup>4</sup>. This ensures that the teacher cannot devote any time to the needs of disabled children in his/her class who therefore get lost in this crowd.

Students who may have surmounted all initial barriers and completed basic education find a large gap in the availability of accessible higher education facilities. It has been noticed that though visually impaired students have a better track record of accessing higher education, those with mobility impairments and speech and hearing problems find it much more difficult to do so.

***"I cannot afford to lose even a day's work in taking care of my crippled child! Loss of a day's wage mean 3 day's starvation of my family!" - Jayamma Ramanagara, India***

All these issues are further compounded by the poor state of the public infrastructure such as the roads and the transport system. The entire gamut of services may be available to the child, but if the child is unable to go to school because the roads are bad and the buses are not accessible, the severity of the problem changes largely. This issue needs to be addressed through advocacy means so that disabled persons can access basic services such as education

and health.

Within the child's life, poverty is the greatest barrier to their education. Lack of good and affordable medical services and quality aids and appliances hinder the child's process to go to school. In many cases, damage becomes irreversible as medical attention is not available at accessible and affordable means and the child is unable to study.

In most deprived households both the parents of disabled children often need to go to work and thus cannot bring the child to school. In rural areas, most parents cannot afford individual transport for the disabled child and hence the child drops out. The child therefore is denied education and the circle of poverty continues. The end result is lack of awareness leading to more disabled children being out of schools, discriminated against and continuing their lives in squalor.

Poverty and the lack of awareness also results in parents not accessing a large number of schemes and entitlements that their children deserve. Parents are often unaware of the rights of their child and allow discrimination to continue. Basic entitlements such as disability certificates, scholarships and pensions are not

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<sup>4</sup> Data from [www.unicef.org/india/education](http://www.unicef.org/india/education)

accesses because the information is not available to them. These lower their motivation to send the child to school. This has a larger impact on the minds of the disabled children themselves and they lose the confidence and the motivation to go to school and to access education.



Most of the public and private buses are inaccessible



Ditch on an unpaved road

Inaccessible and poor infrastructure a video snapshot of Research Programme, India

Poor economic status of the parents often forces them to put all hands into agricultural work and thus they cannot afford to take their children to school and miss a day's labor. In such cases, certain seasons and socio-economic factors have a direct impact on the education of the child. In rural areas, it has been noticed that attendance of the child gets directly affected during the monsoons and harvest times. Bad roads during monsoons and lack of basic infrastructure make matters worse.

Disabled children often do not get support from parents and family members in their education process as well. In many cases it has been found that parents are themselves illiterate and thus are unable to provide any support to their child. The extended family and the larger community only

increase this exclusion through non-cooperation or open hostility.

***"What work he can do even after studies and training? First of all, I do not have money to send my able-bodied children to colleges and vocational education!"***  
***- Mr Hukum Singh, Barabhanki, UttarPradesh, India***

Despite all this, there are parents who continue to try to send their disabled children to school but the lack of role models and inspiration often dampen their spirits. The picture remains bleak to them and they constantly question the end result of taking all the trouble and sending their disabled child to school. If stories of children who have braved the same difficulties and have established a viable livelihood option are brought forth, this may motivate the parents to continue.

Outside the family situation, the insensitive community members and school peers can be very detrimental to the sustenance of the inclusive education efforts. Sensitive community members ensure that a disabled child faces no hindrance in going to schools and promotes quality inclusion at the community level as well. Insensitive peer groups can tease and not include the child in school activities and games. This lowers the motivation of the child and does not build the interest to attend school everyday.

At the larger level the barriers lie in the sheer absence of statistical data and the attitudes of the policy makers. Lack of statistical data makes identification and service provision much more difficult. The census rarely has disability related questions and most families prefer not to reveal data. The measuring systems are not in place and thus the numbers go uncounted. This is further aggravated by the fact that the definition of disability is often so narrow that it leaves out most disabilities. As in case in point, in India the 2001 census documented the disabled percentage in the country as 2% whereas disability professionals and experts in the field guarantee a figure as large as 5-6%<sup>5</sup>. But, education schemes, grants and scholarships provided by the government are calculated on the basis of 2% and therefore the rest 3-4% get conveniently left out.

Internationally, although the UNCRPD<sup>6</sup> has had 147 signatories and most countries have shown their commitments towards providing the rights of disabled children, this has hardly translated into practice and a workable act/policy statement at national levels. This ensures that though there is a will to do good, there are no directives and therefore no plan to work. In many cases the attitudes of government officials at local levels continue to be patronizing and charity oriented and does not have a rights flavor. This directly translates into only fringe services such as enrolment being provided and no rights being addressed. Disabled children in such settings are typically enrolled and asked to sit in the front row while no attention is given to whether the child is gaining any knowledge or not. When the bored child expresses his restlessness, the untrained teachers tag him unmanageable and send him back home.

Apart from these regular barriers faced by children with disabilities in accessing education, Leonard Cheshire Disability – SARO's work in Pakistan and in Sri Lanka has also led to some insights on barriers to education from a conflict resolution point of view. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka have seen decades of violence and while Pakistan is still grappling with its effects, Sri Lanka is in the nascent stage of rehabilitation.

Our experience in conflict areas shows dominant instances of poor infrastructure and lack of basic services. Within this, basic needs such as nutrition, safe drinking

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<sup>5</sup> Data from <http://www.disabilityindia.com/html/facts.html>

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Conventions on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008

water, safety & healthcare are much more urgent and therefore education often gets neglected. As a result, education of disabled children becomes the least priority and the disabled child finally suffers.

As and when education facilities are set up, they are largely lacking in trained teachers and good educational materials. As a result, children who go to school are given substandard education. Trincomalee, Sri Lanka has also witnessed the occupation of schools by armed forces while classes are ongoing in the side. This introduces and weapon culture and makes the children habituated to seeing guns and violence on a daily basis. The effect this has on the young minds of the children is devastating.

Conflicts have a very debilitating effect on people living through them and children especially children with disabilities are often the worst sufferers. Good quality education is a basic prerequisite to ensure sustainable rehabilitation and the hope of a better future.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Above all the barriers mentioned, the crucial point to be noted is that inclusive education cannot be in any way equated with only enrollment and with the mere construction of a ramp. Enrolling a disabled child into school is only the beginning of the process. The school community needs to be prepared for the education of the child and all stakeholders must have undergone capacity building. Focus needs to be put on the education on severely disabled children who often get left out of the system. Only through a sustainable and foolproof system can we ensure that the 24 million accounted and more unaccounted numbers of invisible disabled children are given an opportunity to go to school and to dream of a better future without discrimination and neglect.

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