



Policy Brief

July 2014

School and disability in rural India: need to support entry, engagement and empowerment

This policy brief is based on a small scale study entitled “Role of inclusive education in enhancing children’s personal, social and educational well-being”.

This community based research was carried out in rural Karnataka to investigate the impact of government schools and other educational provisions, on the learning experiences and outcomes of children with disabilities.

The key issues highlighted in this policy brief are:

- Enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is increasing, as is awareness amongst teachers about the presence of children with disabilities in the classroom.
- Teachers have limited pedagogical skills and are inadequately trained to address classroom diversity in meaningful ways.
- Parents of children with disabilities, including those from low income backgrounds, have a central role in shaping their child’s educational journey.
- The central purpose of schooling for children with disabilities is being narrowly perceived in terms of ‘letting them be with others’, thus relegating learning to the background.
- Policy makers need to acknowledge the real dilemmas voiced by teachers in relation to mainstream versus special schools, and address these by undertaking systemic reforms, which will be of benefit to all children, rather than putting in place short term solutions.

Including children with disabilities in meaningful education. With the passing of the Right to Education Act (MHRD, 2009), education in India has become an important part of the political agenda and is now integral in the national discourse. Education of children with disabilities has also come to the forefront in policy proclamations and particularly through efforts made under the on-going national educational programme – the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA or Education for All Movement) where it has adopted a ‘zero rejection’ policy and also put in place various structures to address their needs. Even though education of children with disabilities is being addressed in policies, there is silence about these issues in educational discussions more broadly.

There are some signs of improvements in educational opportunities for children with disabilities in India. Enrolment rates in regular schools increased four-fold over the decade 2002-03 to 2012-13¹ primarily due to targeted focus on this group. However children with disabilities still remain the group most likely to be out of school, even when compared to other dimensions of exclusion, namely caste and gender. Additionally, very little is known about **how children with disabilities experience schooling and its impact on their basic learning outcomes.** National assessments² do not identify children with disabilities in their sample group – it is not clear if these children are excluded from testing or is it that their disability is not recorded.

With quality and learning becoming central to post-2015 development goals, and these goals recognising the importance of leaving no one behind, it is vital to ensure that learning needs of children with disabilities are also being addressed. It is centrally important that all children should be part of an education system and should have the opportunity for meaningful participation. Schooling should be joyful and empowering.

The absence of rigorous evidence which can be used to evaluate the impact of current programmes remains one of the biggest challenges in identifying the most promising approaches to ensuring children with disabilities have the same opportunities to a good quality education as their peers. This lacuna of research, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative traditions, is holding back the possibility of developing evidence-based policy reforms. There is an urgent need to illuminate the ‘black box’ of the classroom, particularly from the perspective of children with disabilities.

The research on which this policy brief draws is a step towards filling that gap. It presents findings of a community based qualitative study conducted in government schools in rural Karnataka (India). This research investigated the impact of mainstream schools on the learning experiences and outcomes of children with a range of impairments, through participatory activities. It also explored the perceptions and experiences of parents in relation to their child’s education. Finally, through a series of individual interviews, focus group discussions with key stakeholders – such as heads, teachers and other professionals, and school based observations, it explored how these institutions supported the educational and social well-being of children with disabilities and their families.

¹ Undoubtedly, state level variations and differences in relation to different types of disabilities exist and these are discussed in Singal, N (2014) Education of children with disabilities in India and Pakistan: An analysis of developments since 2000. Background paper for UNESCO GMR 2015. UNESCO: Paris.

² National assessment tests such as National Achievement Surveys undertaken by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys.

Key messages

...in relation to Parents

Schooling and learning are very important for parents of children with disabilities, also for those living in rural and poor communities. Contrary to popular discourse, parents regard schooling as a mechanism for future life opportunities and invest considerable time and effort into it. Mothers, in our sample, were central and in some cases even accompanied their child to school.

Parents of children with disabilities did not regard access to regular schools as a problem. They all acknowledged that state driven initiatives such as teachers undertaking surveys of children out of school had ensured that teachers were keen to get their child's name on the register. However, parents even though illiterate, were **acutely aware of the low quality of schooling that their child was receiving**. In this regard, parental experiences were illustrative of despair, helplessness and frustration given their inability to influence decisions in relation to their child's schooling.

An overwhelming concern for many parents was a basic one – their child's inability to be toilet trained and/or the lack of disabled friendly toilets in school.

Parents invested both time (sometimes accompanied them to school) and resources (primarily through foregone income) into their child's schooling. However **parents of children with disabilities remain a neglected resource** as they are seen as disengaged by teachers. Additionally, development programmes do not draw on the opportunity to engage such parents in greater advocacy and potentially for claiming accountability in the school system.

...in relation to Teachers

Teachers are not generally negative about children with disabilities, but feel that they are not adequately trained to teach them. Teachers who were interviewed recognised the amplified focus on disability issues in government policies and the general increase in social messages in the print media about disability. While teachers acknowledged that all students have different types of abilities, and can be good or bad at different things, they felt that children with disabilities were, in most cases, particularly poor at grasping concepts, and were not necessarily able to learn easily. Interestingly, teachers did not see children with disabilities in an entirely negative light rather they also acknowledged that some children were simply more difficult to teach than others given the realities of existing mainstream classrooms. Hence teachers tended to either regard these children as more likely to be best taught by experts, or saw the need for special schools.

Teachers voiced several dilemmas between special versus mainstream schooling. Some teachers tended to equate mainstream schools as opportunities for children to socialize with others, and special schools as places where learning was possible due to the availability of specialized support.

In relation to mainstream schools, the general perception was that children with disabilities should be allowed to attend these settings as they will learn to behave with others and their non-disabled peers will also be sensitised to disability issues. Given the realities of their existing classrooms, where they have limited resources, too much syllabus to cover and large numbers of student, **for teachers the purpose of mainstream schooling was reduced to 'letting children be together'**, which overrode concerns for teaching and learning.

Teachers relied on a limited set of pedagogical skills, such as asking children to recite alphabets, copying tasks from the blackboard or the text book etc., rather than making any fundamental changes to their teaching. Even though specialised teaching and learning materials were sometimes available in the classroom it was not apparent that these were being used or that teachers were differentiating

curriculum delivery. When discussing classroom changes that teachers made in order to respond to the needs of children with disabilities, they mentioned reorganising the classroom furniture so that children with disabilities can sit at the front, giving them only half of the syllabus, allowing them longer time to complete a task or asking peers to help the child. Notably, even though encouraging social cohesion seemed to be a central premise for having children with disabilities in mainstream schools, evidence suggested that teachers did not necessarily support this aspect in any formal or structured way.

Under SSA the state provided professional cadre of experts, such as Inclusive Education Resource Teachers (IERTs) and Home Based Volunteers (HBVs) were present and engaged in supporting schools. However they were too few in numbers to meet the increasing demands on their time and were more focused on supporting individual children rather than working with mainstream teachers in developing pedagogical skill sets.

Teachers need to be provided with on-going professional development and other kinds of professional support in meeting the learning needs of children with disabilities. Teacher training efforts cannot simply be about giving teachers strategies to deliver the curriculum to children disabilities rather there is a need for constructive dialogue to support teachers in understanding the specific (and general) needs of all children, particularly those with disabilities. Reforms in teacher education are crucial.

...in relation to Children

Impairment specific differences in social interactions amongst children were clearly visible. During various participatory data collection activities undertaken with children with disabilities it was observed that they were 'happy' at school and in most cases spoke in detail about activities undertaken with peers and the support they received from friends. However, it was clearly noticeable that for example, the child with hearing impairment faced greater problems in interacting and learning in school in comparison to children with other types of disabilities. The child with intellectual impairment was most neglected in classroom settings by both teachers and peers.

Children with disabilities performed poorly in comparison to peer group (identified as below class average by teachers) on all learning tasks. Both groups were given card based tasks to assess their basic numeracy, literacy and reasoning skills³. While some children with physical impairments did better than their non-disabled peers, these were the only exceptions. In all other cases, children with disabilities performed very poorly on all tasks even when provided considerable support. For example, a child identified as having learning difficulties enrolled in Class 7 was unable to do any of the activities aimed at children 4-5 years, such as arranging basic shapes, copying simple letters or numbers etc.

It is important to note that the sample size is small and rather disparate in nature, making it difficult to draw strong conclusions in relation to learning outcomes. However, the results obtained are useful illustrations and highlight why it is vital that learning outcomes must become a central part of discussions in efforts towards education of children with disabilities.

Equity must be at the centre of all efforts. For children with disabilities to benefit from schooling, efforts cannot stop at getting them into school (on which India has recently shown some success), but should also extend to improvements in learning. This also requires a better understanding of how disability interacts with other forms of disadvantage, such as poverty and gender. Only then can post-2015 ambitions of ensuring that no one is left behind can be achieved.

³ The activities involved children classifying objects, recognising different shapes, identifying various colours and doing basic numeracy tasks. The activities were placed on a simple progression scale, with each task increasing in the level of difficulty. Each activity was recorded according to the time taken, support provided and the level achieved.