
GUEST EDITORIAL

**EDUCATION FOR ALL (EFA): AN ELUSIVE GOAL FOR CHILDREN
WITH DISABILITIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES
IN THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC REGION**

Penny Price*

ABSTRACT

The Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that States make primary education compulsory and available free, to all children. It also requires that children with disabilities have access to and receive education in a manner which will help each child to achieve the fullest possible social integration and individual development. However, the current situation for children with disabilities from developing countries in the Asian and Pacific region is not very encouraging. The target of the Agenda for Action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons was to increase the enrolment of children and youth with disabilities. This target has not been met. This paper discusses the reasons for non-achievement of the target and emphasises the need for education of children with disabilities to become a priority agenda in all countries in the region.

A gulf seems to exist between the experience of children with disabilities and their families, in developed and developing countries, in terms of gaining access to any form of education – inclusive or separate. In most developed countries, a high percentage of children with disabilities attend school. In the Asian and Pacific region, Japan and New Zealand claim 100 per cent attendance and Australia 86 per cent, in 1999. Most children in Japan attend separate, special schools, in New Zealand most children attend regular, inclusive schools, and in Australia a transition has been taking place for a number of years, from separate to inclusive schools. There is active research and heated debate on the effectiveness of separate and inclusive models, but the trend is towards inclusion.

The picture for children from developing countries in the Asian and Pacific region, is completely different. Evidence from the review of national progress in the implementation of the Agenda for Action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, suggests that less than 10 per cent of children and youth with disabilities have access to any form of education (1). Evidence presented by the United Nations Children's Fund (2), Jonsson and Wiman (3) and Jones (4), suggest that the figure may be even lower in many developing countries. This situation compares with an enrolment rate of more than 70 per cent in primary education for

non-disabled children and youth, in the region. The target of the Agenda for Action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, was to increase the enrolment of children and youth with disabilities, to close the gap between their current level of enrolment and the net enrolment rate of non-disabled children in each respective country, in the ESCAP region. This target has not been anywhere near being met.

The issue of access must be looked at within the context of human rights. Education is a basic human right and all children, including children with disabilities, have a right to education. This right has been upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action on Education For All (2000) and the Millennium Development Goals (2000). The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the history of the United Nations and has been ratified by all countries in the Asian and Pacific region. It mandates that States make primary education compulsory and available free, to all children, on the basis of equal opportunity, with protection from all kinds of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of disability. It also requires that children with disabilities, have access to and receive education in a manner which will help each child to achieve the fullest possible social integration and individual development.

Lack of access to education, remains the key risk factor for poverty and exclusion of all children, both, those with disabilities and those without. For children with disabilities, however, the risk of poverty owing to lack of education is even higher, than for children without disabilities. Exclusion from education for children and youth with disabilities, results in exclusion from opportunities for further personal development, particularly diminishing their access to vocational training, employment, income generation and business development. It limits their active participation in their families and communities and prevents them from contributing to either. Failure to access education and training makes it almost impossible for them to achieve economic and social independence. It increases their vulnerability to long-term, life-long poverty in what can become a self-perpetuating, inter-generational cycle. Children with disabilities who are denied access to an education, almost inevitably live their lives feeling hopeless and powerless.

Barriers for children with disabilities, in getting access to education in the Asian and Pacific region are many. They include actions, or, more often, lack of action, by;

- the international community,
- Governments,
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs),
- communities,
- organisations of persons with disabilities.

The Education For All initiative, launched by UNESCO at the World Conference on Education for All, at Jomtien China, in March 1990, and reaffirmed and strengthened by the World Education Forum, held at Dakar in Senegal, in April 2000, has never emphasised children with disabilities as a specific priority target group for action, in Education For All initiatives. The result is, that 12 years after the initiative was launched, only 7 Governments in the region reported that they specifically included children with disabilities in their national plans on Education For All. The World Bank has promised funding to 23 countries with strong national EFA plans, to fast-track their education development – but it is most unlikely that many – or any – of the 23 countries who are successful in gaining this funding, will have included children with disabilities in their EFA plans. Governments of the region, have not fulfilled their obligations under the various international conventions and declarations that they have signed, to make sure that full access to education for children with disabilities is provided. Twenty Governments (out of 34 who responded to the questionnaire) reported that they have passed, or plan to pass, legislation mandating education for all children, but even where legislation has been passed, it is often not enforced and children with disabilities remain outside the school system. Attitudes of discrimination towards persons with disabilities at all levels of society, work against the enforcement of access to education for children with disabilities. Data collection on children with disabilities is limited and they are seldom included in national statistics, on the number of children attending school. So there is no monitoring of their progress into and within, the educational system. It becomes a vicious circle because the lack of information makes it easy to keep on neglecting the rights of children with disabilities to receive an education. And it helps explain the minimal rate of progress that has been achieved towards their enrolment in schools, during the last Decade. If we do not count them, we do not have to do anything about them.

Most children with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific region who go to school at all, have attended segregated special schools. These are mostly located in urban areas and can only accept relatively small numbers of children. Many are run by NGOs, with or without government financial support. In the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, it is stated that integrated or inclusive education, with access to education in the regular local neighbourhood or community school, provides the best opportunity for the majority of children and youth with disabilities, to receive an education, including those in rural areas. It is acknowledged that in some instances, special education may currently be the most appropriate form of education, but it should be aimed at preparing students for education in the general system.

In the ESCAP review of national progress carried out in 2002:

- 27 Governments reported that they provide some funding for the education of children with disabilities,

- 29 Governments reported that they provided education for children with disabilities in separate schools,
- 27 Governments reported some educational provision in inclusive regular schools, for children and youth with disabilities, in a trend that should significantly boost their rate of enrolment in education within the region, during the next decade,
- 15 Governments reported that they had established early intervention services, or, were in the process of planning them.

Early intervention, including early detection and identification, during the first four years of life, is critical for infants with disabilities and their families. Support and training for families gives them the skills to help their children develop as fully as possible and prevents secondary disabling conditions.

Improving the quality of education is relevant in both special and regular schools, if children with disabilities are to receive an education which is appropriate, enables them to achieve satisfactory outcomes and take their place actively in their communities. Some major barriers to the provision of quality education in all educational contexts include:

- lack of early identification and intervention services,
- negative attitudes and exclusionary policies and practices towards children with disabilities,
- inadequate teacher training, particularly for teachers in inclusive regular schools who are expected to teach children with a wide range of abilities,
- lack of support systems for teachers,
- lack of appropriate teaching materials and devices,
- failure to make modifications to the school environment to make it fully accessible,
- a limited curriculum that does not prepare them for vocational training, or an integrated life in the wider community.

Many of these barriers can be overcome through deliberate policy, planning, implementation strategies and allocation of resources to include children and youth with disabilities in all national education development initiatives.

The UN Millennium Development Goal (2000) concerning education states that :

“By the year 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.”

The Millennium Development Goals, as with so many mandates before them, did not make specific reference to children or adults or any persons with disabilities.

In the new regional Framework that has been developed to guide action on disability policy and implementation in the next Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 2003 – 2012, the targets set in the seven priority areas for action, explicitly incorporate the millennium development goals to ensure that concerns relating to persons with disabilities, become an integral part of efforts to achieve these goals.

Education is one of the seven priority areas identified for further action, because of the critical concern at the very low rate of enrolment in education of children with disabilities, in the region, at the end of the first Decade.

The Biwako Millennium Framework for Action towards an Inclusive, Barrier-free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, was presented for adoption by Governments of the region at the High-level Inter-governmental Meeting to conclude the Decade, held in Otsu in Japan in October 2002. The following targets have been set, and 14 actions identified, to help achieve them.

1. By 2010, having at least 75 per cent of children and youth with disabilities, completing primary schooling.
2. By 2012, all infants and young children with disabilities, will have received early intervention services, with support for their families.

Many of the 14 actions include measures that must be taken by Governments, as given below:

- Governments need to pass laws to make it compulsory for all children, including children with disabilities, to attend school. The laws must be enforced and children with disabilities included, in national EFA plans.
- Educational policy and planning should be developed which enables children to attend local primary schools. Schools should be prepared for changes to the education system, with the clear understanding that all children have the right to attend school and it is the responsibility of the school to accommodate differences in learners. Families and organisations of people with disabilities and communities should be consulted.
- Adequate funding must be allocated within the education budget. Education of children with disabilities, is not an act of charity, but an obligation of Governments.
- A range of educational options needs to be available.
- Comprehensive data needs to be collected and used, to plan appropriate services and support systems (Early intervention).
- Five year enrolment targets need to be set and monitored.
- Services for early detection, identification and early intervention are needed, with collaboration between all concerned Ministries, communities and families of children with disabilities (community based services).

- Families of children with disabilities, need to be made aware of the right of their children to attend school, particularly in poor and rural areas.
- Many measures need to be taken to improve the quality of education in all schools for all children, including children with disabilities in special and inclusive educational contexts.
- Barrier-free schools and accessible transport.
- Research into effective school management and teaching methodologies.
- Organisations of and for people with disabilities, need to place advocacy for the education of children with disabilities, as a high priority item on their agenda.
- Regional cooperation needs to be strengthened, to facilitate the sharing of experiences and good practices, to support the development of inclusive initiatives.

The actions that need to be taken are clear. Evidence from the Decade suggests, that Governments are beginning to pay more attention to the issue of educating children with disabilities. But the pace is too slow and sustained advocacy is needed. Who will speak for children with disabilities? Unable to advocate for themselves, they are the most vulnerable group of persons with disabilities, the most dependent on others to uphold their human rights, including their right to education.

The international community is increasing its efforts in this area, with a working group that has established a flagship within the global “education for all” effort that would focus on the educational needs of children, youth, and adults with disabilities, in developing and transition nations. The flagship is entitled the “EFA Flagship on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion.” This name was chosen to stress that education is a human right for all, and that “inclusion”, is a primary goal of education strategies and settings.

We are moving to a point where our goal is an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society. We want disability issues included as an integral part of all national development policies and plans. We want policy developed in full consultation with representatives of organisations of disabled persons. So, perhaps it is time for organisations of disabled persons to take a leadership role in advocating for the education of all children with disabilities, and place the achievement of this goal as a priority item on their advocacy agenda. An example from Fiji will illustrate the powerful effects that can be achieved.

In 2001, Fiji Disabled Persons Association (FDPA), with the weight of DPI Oceania behind it, challenged the Government’s position on education of children with disabilities, on the basis of the Constitution. The result was the explicit inclusion of children with disabilities in national EFA plans. The Fiji Social Justice Act, 2001, addressing the issue of students with special needs, resulted in a blueprint, ratified by the Government. It established a Special

Education Section within the Ministry of Education, an infrastructure committee to address access issues and teaching resources, curriculum strengthening to meet the needs of all students, community awareness and family support programmes, support for inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools, and strengthening of special schools as appropriate, review of early intervention strategies, teacher training curriculum development and strengthening of vocational training in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including people with disabilities and the private sector. The extent to which these outcomes were influenced by the fact that the Chairperson of FDPA and Vice-Chair of DPI Oceania had a Master's degree in Education, is not known. It is a strong argument for ensuring that more children with disabilities have the opportunity to attend not only primary school, but secondary and tertiary education as well. We need more leaders with knowledge, expertise, commitment and advocacy skills, to safeguard the future of our children.

Education needs to become a priority agenda item for all organisations of disabled persons in developing countries. The future of disabled children is a cross-disability issue. Parents and families of children with disabilities need to be welcomed by, and to work in close association with self-help organisations. The voice of children with disabilities must be heard.

* Consultant, Disability Programme
Emerging Social Issues Division
UNESCAP, Bangkok
E-mail:penelopej2000@yahoo.com

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