

Education of children with disabilities in India and Pakistan: Critical analysis of developments in the last 15 years

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Abstract This article presents an analysis of key developments in educational policies and strategies, since 2000, in relation to the education of children with disabilities in India and Pakistan. It responds to a set of specific questions focused on factors that have shaped the increased emphasis on education of children with disabilities, how national policies and programmes respond to their needs, and their current educational status. The article draws on analysis of official policies, various programme documents, and empirical research evidence. It concludes by reflecting on the two main foci for future work in relation to the education of children with disabilities.

Keywords Children with disabilities · Primary education · India · Pakistan

Education of children with disabilities is now an integral part of the international discourse, as noted in the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015a) and the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, World Education Forum 2015, Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea 2015). The Incheon Declaration noted:

No education target should be considered met unless met by all. We therefore commit to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind.

This is by no means a recent commitment, as Article II of the EFA Declaration (UNESCO 2000) made a clear observation that “[the] learning needs of the disabled demand special attention”.

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However, children with disabilities continue to be the group most excluded from the education system. It is widely acknowledged that of the 57 million children who were out of school in 2011, a high proportion of these were likely to have had some type of disability. UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report (GMR) (UNESCO 2014), based on analysis of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) from four countries, noted that children at higher risk of disability are far more likely to be denied a chance to go to school. Evidence also suggests that school completion rates are lowest amongst children with disabilities, even when they are compared to other marginalized groups (UNESCO 2010). A Plan International report (2013)—based on the analysis of Plan's dataset of 1.4 million sponsored children from 30 different countries—reiterated the magnitude of the problem when it found that children with disabilities were ten times more likely not to attend school than children without disabilities.

Nonetheless, many countries in the South have seen significant developments in the last 15 years regarding the education of children with disabilities. In this article, I focus specifically on the developments in India and Pakistan to explore three main questions:

- What factors have shaped the increased focus on education for children with disabilities in government policies?
- How do the existing national policies address education of children with disabilities?
- What is the current educational status of children with disabilities, and how can the existing challenges be addressed?

India and Pakistan are useful examples, given that both countries have seen a rapid rise in school enrolment more broadly. However, both continue to face an uphill task in relation to the high numbers of out-of-school children and significant concerns about the quality of schooling. For example, De, Khera, Samson, and Mugar (2011) note that while in India enrolments rates are high, regular student (and teacher) attendance and quality of schooling remain paramount concerns. Several independently conducted studies, including the ASER (from 2005 to 2011), and the OECD–PISA study (Das and Zajonc 2008) have reported very low levels of learning among school-going children. Similarly, Pakistan has the second-highest out-of-school population, amounting to 10% of the world's share (UNESCO 2014). Additionally, reports such as ASER and SchoolTELLS (Aslam et al. 2011) highlight the very poor quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. A government-funded report by the Pakistan Education Taskforce (Barber 2010) declared Pakistan to be in a state of “educational emergency”.

Nonetheless, in recent years these countries have taken steps to include children with disabilities. While these efforts have been varied, a closer analysis highlights common themes and issues that are of broader relevance to the education of children with disabilities, particularly for other low- and middle-income countries.

In answering the questions this article poses, I draw on recent and most relevant official policies, documents of various national programmes focusing on children with disabilities, and research addressing similar issues. However, given the lack of empirical research, national policy documents are my main source of analysis. Taylor, Miriam, Rizvi, and Lingard (1997) state that education policies do not emerge in a vacuum; they reflect compromises between competing and oppositional interests. While they are responses to particular social changes, they also represent these changes in different ways and accord them varying significance. Policy developments have had both significant intended and unintended consequences, which are clearly evident when one examines insights gathered from the field in both India and Pakistan.

Question 1: What factors have shaped the increased focus on education for children with disabilities in government policies?

Policy changes are context driven. In the case of education of children with disabilities, three main levers of change are evident, as discussed below.

Growing international attention on disability issues

Various international mandates have consistently placed pressure for change on national governments, including India and Pakistan. Important examples include the 1981 United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), which focused global attention on disability issues for the first time, and the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (1983–1992), which began the process of transforming the disability issue from one of social welfare to one understood as a central part of the development process. Another significant landmark was the second Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (2003–2012)—Biwako Millennium Framework for Action: Towards an Inclusive, Barrier-free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. In this framework, education was a central priority. The most recent and highly influential international proclamation has been the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2008). Over 150 countries—including India and Pakistan—have ratified this convention. These international declarations have had a significant influence in bringing disability into national debates.

Urwick and Elliott (2010) discuss at length the impact of these international declarations and the role played by international funding bodies in shaping the educational practices of many Southern countries. With specific reference to the Indian context, I provide (Singal 2006) a policy-level analysis of how, for over a decade (1990–2000), the focus on children with disabilities in Indian educational policy gathered momentum as a direct result of international declarations. Similarly, Kalyanpur (2008) critically analyzes how funding provided by international aid agencies to India shaped important policy developments. The impact of these international mandates can be either negative or positive, but definitely cannot be overlooked.

“Spill-over effect” of developments in education more broadly

A growing international commitment towards education more generally is clearly evident, and has resulted in what might be termed a “spill-over effect” for children with disabilities. The focus now is on addressing all out-of-school groups, with children with disabilities recognized as most likely to be disadvantaged (UN 2015b).

Based on findings of a large-scale research project in rural and urban communities in India, De, Khera, Samson, and Kumar (2011) remind us how the educational landscape has undergone a significant change since the 1990s. They identify increased awareness of the need for education and a desire for schooling amongst the poorest communities. Education in India, they note, has now become a public issue of concern to voters, and media attention has begun to focus more on what goes on in schools and how the system can be extended and improved. There is clear evidence of greater democratic engagement, public debates, and pressure on political parties to improve the system. The belief in education as a common good, which can deliver a better quality of life, is evident even among poor families (Krishna 2004).

It is interesting to note how these developments are also shaping the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities. My colleagues and I (Singal, Jefferey, Jain, and Sood 2011), based on interviews we conducted with parents of young people with disabilities in rural Madhya Pradesh (India), noted the high importance that parents placed on schooling for these children. Parents even made substantial investments in terms of time spent taking their child to school, and so on. The paramount role of mothers in supporting the education of their daughters is best illustrated in the findings of Hammad and Singal (2014), in the context of urban families in Pakistan. This research highlights the significant psychological and physical stress that mothers endured in making sure that their daughters with disabilities were able to access high levels of schooling. In most cases, mothers were driven by the perception that being well educated would allow their daughters to live with dignity—that is, to find a suitable source of employment, especially when marriage was not seen as an option given the prevalence of negative societal attitudes. Thus, this spill-over effect of broader changes in education cannot be underestimated.

Changing discourses around disability at the national level

Finally, the growth of a strong advocacy movement and the development of self-help organizations (SHO) at the local and national levels have also been important levers for change. In India, the number of NGOs has increased significantly, thus giving more visibility to disability issues. The World Bank (2009) reported that the number of NGOs involved as partners in the *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), or Education for All Movement, in India grew from 470 in 2004–2005 to just under 800 at the end of 2007, with these organizations involved “in a range of areas, including residential bridge courses; home-based education, training, and provision of aids and appliances; provision of Braille books; and broader planning and implementation of inclusive education strategies” (p. 77). In the last decade or so, public discourse concerning disability has grown in India, as evidenced by greater coverage of these issues in both the electronic and print media.

In Pakistan, Ghaus-Pasha, Jamal, and Iqbal (2002) estimated the number of registered NGOs to be around 45,000. While the number of NGOs working specifically in the disability sector is not available, given the nature of the work and the low prominence that government policies accorded to disability, it is likely that a great many of these organizations focus on marginalized groups, including people with disabilities.

Disability issues, particularly in the case of India, are no longer simply marginalized or overlooked. Jeffery and Singal (2008) examined how persons with disabilities may well find themselves enmeshed in a kind of “surveillance society”—unlike their situation in the mid-1990s, when virtually nothing was known about them (Harriss-White 2003, p. 1). While notions of stigma do exist, there is also an acknowledgment that a number of positive factors also influence the lives of people with disabilities in these settings. Evidence from qualitative studies conducted with people with disabilities and their families highlights their real struggles but also the opportunities that let them aspire to lives filled with hope (Singal and Jain 2012). In other Southern contexts, similar findings (Singal and Muthukrishna 2014) challenge the dominant tendency toward homogenizing the disability experience as stigmatized and disempowered.

In conclusion, even though the levers of change have been the same in both India and Pakistan, what is striking is the varying degrees to which these have been influential. A key difference in the two countries seems to lie in the administrative structures adopted and

their impact on educational prioritization. Various commentators have argued that in Pakistan the federal government's decision to devolve the Education Ministry to provincial governments had a huge negative impact on the education of children with disabilities because that mission consequently dropped down on the list of priorities. Additionally, Hameed (2012) notes that provincial governments remain unclear about how to respond to the education needs of children with disabilities, and he notes two main barriers in this regard: namely, the "attitudes of ordinary school teachers and attitudes of special education teachers".

Question 2: How do existing national policies address education of children with disabilities?

In India, the focus on children with disabilities is under the purview of two separate ministries: the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (within this, the Department of Disability Affairs), and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. While the former has the overall responsibility for persons with disabilities, the latter specifically focuses on educational provision for children and young adults with disabilities. India's 2009 Right to Education (RTE) Act recognizes education as a fundamental right. The law states that education for children in the age 6–14 groups, including those who have dropped out or face issues in admission due to migration, caste, disability, etc., should be free and compulsory. All children with disabilities within the act have been included under the blanket term "disadvantaged group". Additionally, the Persons with Disabilities Act: Equal Opportunity, Protection of Right and Full Participation (MLJ 1996) has been another important legislative marker; this was the first act to recognize and make provisions for seven different disabilities. It highlighted the need to adopt a dual approach to educating children with disabilities, advocating both for mainstreaming and for specialist provision where needed. With India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006), recent amendments have been made to the act; the revised Disability Rights bill broadens the definition of "disability" from purely medically drawn boundaries to the disability's impact on activities of daily life. These amendments are significant, reflecting the changing perceptions and attitudes toward disability in the broader political arena.

Over the years, various national-level programmes, such as the District Primary Education Programme (in the 1990s) and the SSA have shaped developments in schools and classrooms, and these have also included a focus on promoting educational provision for children with disabilities. The SSA is India's current flagship elementary education programme, which seeks to provide quality elementary education to all, focusing especially on girls' education and children with special needs. More significantly, SSA categorically brings the concerns of children with disabilities—or those termed "children with special needs" (CWSN)—under the framework of "inclusive education" (IE) and argues for the adoption of a "zero rejection policy" so that no child is left out of the education system (SSA 2007).

SSA notes that education of children with disabilities should be promoted through a multi-option model of educational delivery, which will not only increase access but also provide these children with appropriate need-based skills—be they vocational skills, functional literacy, or simply activities of daily living—in the most appropriate learning environment. Therefore, alongside mainstreaming, SSA also promotes a combination of

home-based education (HBE) and alternate educational settings in order to address the educational needs of children with severe intellectual/physical disabilities (SSA 2007).

While the SSA objectives are expressed nationally, they offer flexibility at the state and district levels in implementation, depending primarily on the number of children identified and the resources available. For example, 27 states are currently implementing HBE; while Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand rely on NGOs to implement this programme, Karnataka and Kerala have appointed volunteers who visit these children at home to provide them with basic functional skills. While such flexibility might be regarded as a positive step, it is not surprising that this has resulted in many different models across the country—raising concerns about the quality and effectiveness of provision (SSA 2013).

In contrast, Pakistani government policy rarely mentions children with disabilities. A recent important legislative landmark the 2012 Right to Free and Compulsory Education bill, which ensures free education to children aged 5–16 years, as enshrined in Article 25A of the constitution. However, the act does not make any specific reference to children with disabilities. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA 2002) published a report profiling disability in Pakistan, which noted that “persons with disabilities are mostly unseen, unheard and uncounted persons in Pakistan. They are the most marginalised group” (p. 5). Furthermore, the devolution of education from the federal to the provincial level has further complicated the issue in relation to those with disabilities. It has made it even more difficult to address such issues as the comparability of data on disability, the availability of professionals with the requisite skills, and essential resources.

In Pakistan, religious institutions were historically the main providers for services to persons with disabilities. In 1959, for the first time, the National Commission on Education placed the education of children with disabilities on the government agenda. It recommended provision of vocational education for children and adults with mental retardation and training of special educators. However, it wasn't until the 1980s that the government significantly increased its involvement: through larger budgets for special education, the establishment of more than 200 special-education institutions, and the formation of a Federal Directorate General of Special Education (Lari 2006). Some argue that an important reason for this focus on disability was due to a personal commitment of then-president General Zia ul Haq (1977–1988), whose daughter had multiple disabilities (Miles 1990). Interestingly, and rather significantly, this period also coincided with the emergence of a strong international movement, driven by the UN, resulting in the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–1992).

In contrast, recent years have not seen the same level of commitment toward people with disabilities. Interestingly, the only mention of disability (termed “handicapped”) in the 2009 National Education Policy is in the aims and objectives, where the policy notes (as point 15 of 20 bullet points): “To equalize access to education through provision of special facilities for girls and boys alike, under-privileged/marginalized groups and handicapped children and adults”.

To date, the passage of the 2002 National Policy for Persons with Disability remains the most significant official document on disability. It is a very aspirational document, with little reference to on-the-ground reality and no clear indication of steps that will be taken to realize its goals. At a general level, the policy regurgitates what one would expect of any such document: “the need for a rights based approach rather than welfare concepts in programme planning and implementation...active collaboration from all stakeholders...” (p. 5). In relation to education, it specifically notes the need to adopt a “shift from exclusive system of education to inclusive education for the children with disabilities” (p. 6). Further on it states, “At the international level, the movement towards making

education an integral part of education has been gaining ground. Integration of children with disabilities in normal systems of education shall therefore be promoted at all levels” (p. 7). It is ironic that the only rationale put forth for including children with disabilities is that this is what is happening at an international level.

Question 3: What is the current educational status of children with disabilities, and what insights can be drawn from existing school-based research?

Based on analysis of administrative data collected under the SSA, the World Bank (2009) suggests that in India, primary enrolment of children with special needs (CWSN) has considerably improved during the 2000s. (Official Indian documents use the term “child with special needs” [CWSN]. However, that term remains undefined and most regard it as being synonymous with “children with disabilities” [CWD]). Enrolment of CWSN in regular schools increased sharply in official data: from 566,921 in 2002–2003 to 2.35 million in 2012–2013 (NUEPA 2014); of these, 1.64 million were in primary and 0.70 million were in upper primary classes. However, significant disparities in relation to gender and types of impairments are clearly evident. Analysis of the 2012–2013 DISE data highlights variations in school enrolment for children with different types of impairments, wherein those with autism and cerebral palsy are least represented in the school-going population.

Additionally, significant intrastate differences in enrolment of children with different types of impairments are also clearly evident (Singal 2014). For example, Kerala showed the highest increase in the percentage of CWSN in the total elementary school population; this rose from 2.78% in 2010–2011 to 4.18% in 2012–2013. In the case of Himachal Pradesh, CWSN constituted only 1.1% and 1.3%, respectively, of the total primary and upper-primary school population in 2012–2013, with slightly more boys than girls (boys, 1.3% and 1.5%; girls, 1% and 1.2%).

While enrolment rates are slowly increasing, basic school infrastructure continues to remain poor. DISE data indicate that the proportion of schools with ramps increased significantly: from 1.49% in 2004 to 55.09% in 2012–2013 (NUEPA 2014). The WASH Report (UNICEF 2012) noted that, despite well-articulated guidelines, the biggest challenge remains the lack of disabled-friendly toilets and other facilities in most schools across the country. Studies show that very few school buildings have ramps; and, in most cases, even these are broken or the surface is too uneven for easy mobility. Lack of access to school toilets emerged as an important concern in my study (Singal 2014) in rural Karnataka. The inability of children with disabilities to access toilets or to use one independently resulted, in most cases, in their low school attendance and dropping out of school.

Research studies over the last few years have consistently highlighted the perceived lack of expertise amongst teachers and their low confidence in meeting the needs of children with disabilities. A survey conducted by Shah, Das, Desai, and Tiwari (2013) in Ahmedabad, across 560 government schoolteachers, noted that teachers felt unable to support inclusion. In another survey of 223 primary and 130 secondary schoolteachers in Delhi by Das, Gichuru, and Singh (2013) found that teachers saw themselves as having limited or low competence for working with students with disabilities; 70% of them had not received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Furthermore, 87% of them noted that they did not have any support in their

classrooms from others, which would have helped them to address the needs of children with disabilities.

Researchers examining classroom-based processes in more detail provide similar insights. I note in my 2008 study, based on data collected through teacher interviews and classroom observations, that even teachers in high fee-paying private schools in New Delhi, with substantial resources at their disposal, were unable to engage effectively with children with disabilities. These children remained at the margins of both the teaching and the learning processes. This scenario was no different from my findings in a more recent study in Karnataka (Singal 2014), where, on one hand, government schoolteachers were accepting of the presence of children with disabilities and realized that including them was part of government policy, but, on the other hand, did not see themselves as sufficiently confident or skilled to include these children in their classroom processes. Interestingly, as required by government (national and state) policies, the district had additional professionals who were mandated to support mainstream teachers by helping them develop alternative pedagogical styles, and so on, but their numbers were too few. Thus, based on their perceived lack of essential pedagogical skills and absent additional support, teachers were willing to let children be in the class—under the rationale that it was good for their social inclusion—but did not take responsibility for the child's learning.

Additionally, while children with disabilities are being enrolled, only recently have concerns about their learning come into focus. A survey of 122,543 Class V students, undertaken by the NCERT (Soni 2013) across 6,602 schools in 27 states and 4 union territories, found that the performance of the 6% of students who belonged to a “physically challenged group” (the report does not define the term or the characteristics of this group) was substantially worse than that of the rest of the population. Children reported to have a physical impairment scored, on average, 12 scale points less than their peers in reading comprehension, even after controlling for background characteristics.

Thus, it would be fair to state that, while India has made efforts to increase the enrolment of children with disabilities, progress has been very slow—fractured in terms of access for all, and with serious concerns about the quality of schooling for those who do make it school.

Similar reflections are also evident in the context of Pakistan. A UNESCAP document (2006) noted that only 4% of the total number of school-going age children with disabilities are enrolled in various schools/centres of the country; this figure was reiterated in 2013 in a newspaper article (Naqvi 2013). Fontana and Lari's (2002) observation that “education of children with special needs in Pakistan is an area which is grossly neglected and in need of urgent attention” (p. 1), though made over a decade ago, remains true. Rieser (2008) noted that Pakistan is still in a phase of developing inclusive policies; in his report he identified only a few small-scale projects rather than a consolidated national commitment.

In 2010, colleagues and I undertook a purpose-designed household survey of 1,094 urban and rural households in Punjab and the Kyhber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)—formerly called the North West Frontier Province (Singal, Bhatti, and Malik 2010). In that survey, we also found evident educational exclusion: indications of a decreased likelihood of schooling for youths with disabilities as compared to their nondisabled peers. Over 33% of the young people (15–30 years) in the sample were “never enrolled”; among youths without disabilities, this figure was 26%. Not only were those with disabilities more likely to be excluded, but there was double discrimination against girls with disabilities, which is reflective of the gender discrimination in women's education at large (UNESCO 2014).

It was also evident that the earlier the onset of a person's disability the less likely the person was to get some education. This was particularly the case for those with difficulties

in learning or personal care—and to some extent for those reporting physical difficulty. Interestingly, the young men with disabilities who had made it into the school system had the same schooling levels as their nondisabled male peers. Additionally, young men with disabilities (particularly those with moderate and severe difficulties) were more than twice as likely (5%) than their nondisabled peers (2%) to be trained to become a *Hafiz-I Quran* [Hafiz is a title bestowed on someone who has memorised the Quran and does not forget it, they are highly respected within Islamic community]. Pasha's observations (2003) support this finding. It is plausible that becoming a *Hafiz* increases a young man's chances for social participation and gives him a better social status. Anecdotal evidence (Singal, Bhatti, and Malik 2010) also suggests that becoming a *Hafiz* has several other advantages, including higher status in society and receiving some benefits (additional marks in board exams, higher ranking in scholarships, etc). Moreover, becoming a *Hafiz* is also regarded as a valuable religious duty, as it also means that “the soul of the parents is protected”.

Similar to India, the few existing classroom-based studies focused on children with disabilities in Pakistan highlight significant concerns about the quality of education and the challenges faced by mainstream teachers in meeting the needs of children with disabilities. A recent survey undertaken by Pasha (2012), covering 300 teachers across 75 public and private primary schools in Lahore, highlighted that schools are currently unprepared to include these children due to various factors, such as: the lack of clear admission policies; little knowledge among school administrators regarding how to implement inclusive education, inaccessible school infrastructure; and the absence of professional development opportunities for teachers to implement inclusive education. Haider (2008) reported somewhat similar results, using a survey instrument to gauge teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities. Based on data from 50 teachers (48 women, 2 men) and 50 special educators (47 women, 2 men) from 4 schools in Lahore, Haider noted that 70% of mainstream teachers felt that they lacked the skills and the exposure necessary to address the needs of children with disabilities. For 81% of the teachers, limited resources in classrooms were a key concern. Similarly, Rieser (2008) concludes that rigidity of the curriculum, lack of resource teachers in schools, poor quality paediatric health services, and lack of specialists to help assess children's special needs are some of the main barriers to inclusion in Pakistan.

Concluding reflections

The last few years have seen some important developments in the field of education for children with disabilities. However, much remains to be done. Unlike 2000, when arguments focused primarily on presenting a rationale for allowing children with disabilities access to mainstream classrooms, this is no longer the only concern. Policymakers now have greater awareness of the need to include children with disabilities in education, as evident in the official rhetoric in both India and Pakistan, but various challenges remain to making this a reality. In taking some of the debates forward, the following section concludes by outlining two key issues that must underline future efforts at the level of policy and research.

Issue 1: Access and quality—One can't follow the other

As we plan for the post-2015 agenda, the real challenge is also to make sure that we don't relegate learning outcomes for children with disabilities to the background. Efforts to address the “global learning crisis” (UNESCO 2014) must include children with

disabilities at the levels both of assessment and interventions. Little and Rolleston's (2014) observation, though made about children without disabilities, that "rising enrolment levels have not, however, necessarily been accompanied by improvements in the quality of schooling and level of learning outcomes" (p. 2), is of equal, if not greater, concern for those with disabilities. Rather, it could be argued that it is of even greater concern that we make sure that schools equip children with disabilities with key skills—given that, for many of them, education may be the only mechanism of gaining skills that will help them find work and move out of a lifetime of poverty (Braunholtz 2007). Thus, learning basic skills of numeracy, literacy, and reasoning should be an important feature of any policy regarding these children, even though research evidence from Pakistan and India suggests that teachers do not seem prepared for such a task. I feel that this argument is best exemplified in findings (Singal 2014)—based on 12 in-depth teacher interviews and 16 hours of classroom observation in a mainstream school in rural Karnataka (India)—in which it was clear that teachers' discourse and practices were overwhelmingly driven by the perceived social benefits of having children with disabilities attend mainstream schools. Letting children be together (allowing them to sit and play together) dominated any efforts made by teachers to enable children to learn together. Mainstream teachers did not feel confident in addressing the learning needs of children with disabilities, and the professional cadre being developed to support them (such as IERTs) were too overstretched in terms of the number of schools they had to cover. Thus, any focus on classroom participation and learning for this group of children was, in the majority of the cases, relegated to the background.

Therefore, the need to support is paramount. This cannot simply be done through one-off teacher training programmes; it requires developing a more systemic approach toward continued professional development and providing teachers with appropriate support to overcome real challenges. There is now an urgent need to involve teachers in constructive dialogue to support the development of training programmes that are truly beneficial in equipping them with the needed pedagogical skills. Reforms in teacher education are crucial. Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) argue that the need for educating (and how to educate) children with disabilities must be framed within Southern contexts, as well as how teachers can be best supported to deliver meaningful education for all.

Issue 2: Rights are integral, but so are resources and research

Historically, the rationale for educating children with disabilities has been anchored in a rights-based discourse, as evident in various international declarations. Undoubtedly, these rights are essential—but arguments for upholding rights do not necessarily take the field forward, as this must be accompanied by investments. It could be argued that the current failure to invest in the education of children with disabilities is, in itself, a barrier to the realization of their human rights, as it commits these children to a lifetime of poverty (Filmer 2005).

A report by RESULTS (2010) noted that in 2005–2006, under SSA (India) only an estimated £2.3 million out of an overall budget of £78 million was spent on supporting children with special needs. (The National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, which undertook an analysis of Union budgets at the national level since 2008, provides a more detailed picture of budgetary allocations.) This report reflects clearly the very low priority accorded to disability in budgetary allocations, with India spending only 0.0009% of its GDP on disability. This includes allocations for schemes across key ministries such as health, education, labour, rural development, youth affairs, and sports. We also see this decline at the state level. For example, in the year 2011–2012,

Karnataka spent Rs. 3,950.15 lakh on 131,017 children with disabilities—a rate of Rs. 3,000 per child (SSA 2014). However, the budget per child declined considerably in 2013–2014.

One commonly held misapprehension is that investment in the education of children with disabilities is not cost effective. However, recent studies, such as that by Lamichhane and Sawada (2013), have clearly noted that failure to invest in such education has a significant negative impact on national economic and social development.

Issue 3: Lack of evidence

Finally, little rigorous evidence exists that can be used to evaluate the impact of current policies and shape future programmes, and this remains one of the biggest challenges in the field of education and disabilities. This lack of evidence leaves important questions about how and where to best invest unanswered. A systematic review (Bakhshi, Kett, and Oliver 2013)—on identifying approaches that increase the accessibility to education for children with disabilities—noted that, given the lack of rigorous research, “it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the most effective approaches (in terms of impact or indeed cost) to increase the accessibility of education for children with disabilities” (p. 34).

During times of evidence-based policy developments, this lacuna of rigorous quantitative and qualitative research is most felt in the field of disability and education in Southern contexts. However, given that low priority has traditionally been accorded to funding research concerning disability and education, it is not surprising to see this lack of evidence. But as we move forward, the development of a more coherent agenda must be based on rigorous research findings. More importantly, such evidence-gathering must involve people with disabilities, as it is ultimately by listening to these voices that we can begin to respond to their lived realities.

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