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# What is in a name? Labels and terminologies regarding disability and special educational needs: A continuing concern

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# What is in a Name? Labels and Terminologies Regarding Disability and Special Educational Needs: A Continuing Concern

A Team Effort

No two individuals are alike and differences among adults and children are common. This is an acknowledged fact, but an issue of concern is how do we look at differences and what language do we use to describe them? You will recall that in the Inaugural issue of EENET ASIA we had included an article on “**What is in a Name.... Labels and Terminology Regarding Disabilities and Special Education Needs.**” focusing on the importance of using appropriate, respectful terminology.

Discussions are held around the world for finding, accepting and using appropriate terminology. One such discussion took place in August 2005 at the Glasgow EENET Pre-Congress Meeting at ISEC (Inclusive and Supportive Special Education Congress). The main aim of the meeting was to review EENET’s current activities and discuss possible future scenarios. The inaugural issue of EENET ASIA was also launched at this meeting.

Discussing the terminology issue the speakers at the meeting highlighted:

- The importance of finding and using appropriate terminology,
- Being aware of national contexts and determining which words or phrases are most appropriate in each context.

In order to promote this debate, and flag the issues of concern in our Asian context we decided to explore further and seek views from people working in the field. Questions were asked and interesting responses received from South Asia (Pakistan), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Cambodia) and Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). The salient issues raised in the responses received are highlighted.

*QUESTION: What is the terminology being used in your national context, to refer to groups of children who contribute to the diversity in the learning settings?*

## **Sectoral considerations governing terminology**

In **Cambodia** the terminology used to refer to groups of children contributing to diversity varies somewhat depending on the sector in question. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport for instance, speak of; ‘vulnerable children’ and ‘children with special needs’ whilst the social sector including the Ministry of Social Affairs; Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, the ministry whose remit specifically includes that of disability, uses commonly used donor terms such as ‘children at risk’ and ‘children in difficult circumstances’. A variety of terms commonly used elsewhere are also encountered in Cambodia, both in some of the written documents available, in meetings and discussions etc.

In **Indonesia** the Ministry of National Education uses ‘extraordinary children’, ‘children with disabilities’ and ‘children with special needs’ whilst the social sector including the Ministry of Social Affairs, also uses ‘vulnerable children’ and ‘children with social problems’. In the Indonesian Ministry of National Education very often children with disabilities are categorized using the alphabet from ‘A to Q’. (A is used for children with visual impairment, B for children with hearing impairment, etc.)

In **Kyrgyzstan** the Ministry of Education uses ‘children with physical and intellectual impairment’ while the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection ‘children with disabilities’ and just started uses terminology ‘children at risk’ concerning of children with different social problems. (Under these two Ministers we have special schools and institutions according to the impairments. ‘Children at risk’ are those who are not attending any school due to different social problems.)

## **Misleading and inappropriate terminology**

“In Pakistan in my opinion the terminology

used to refer to some groups of children is misleading and inappropriate. For example children living in rural and remote areas are referred to as ‘underprivileged’. Many efforts by NGOs and Government in the form of special residential schools, and other incentives tend to inadvertently exclude them from the mainstream. Are the children underprivileged or are the circumstances in which they are living ‘disadvantaged’? It is a known fact that many children in **Pakistan** are engaged in labour. There are certain industries and work places for which entrepreneurs consider children as the best workers. These include the carpet-making industry; garages and small restaurants, shoe polishing, begging, etc. One third of the population in Pakistan lives below poverty line, and many income-poor parents have no choice other than pushing their children into labour. The entrepreneurs fully exploit their circumstances. The terminology used in Pakistan for children involved in child labour is ‘working children’. When translated the term is meant to convey a positive loaded interpretation implying a meaning conveying that children are working out of choice and are contributing to the national development.

Again there are some children who are overlooked. For example girls in rural areas of Pakistan are least talked about and are often deprived of their basic rights. They have limited access to education, health, and clean water, play facilities, etc. The terminology used implies that they are a burden and are non-contributing members of society.”

### **Historical influence on terminology**

The use of terminology is influenced by history and in many countries in Central Asia previously under the Soviet regime, disability was treated as a medical condition, which required children to be separated from others and receive specialist treatment. The perception that disability needs to be cured, and that children with disabilities are unable to learn alongside their peers without disabilities, is still reflected in the current educational legislation. Children with disabilities are mostly placed in institutions away from their

families and communities. “Actually in our context -unfortunately we still use the term ‘Defectology’ because it is a part of our inherited education system.”

*QUESTION: Does the term/terminology have a negative connotation?*

Most terminology in use is not considered to have any particular negative connotation within **Cambodia and Indonesia**. However within the many different cultural contexts in Indonesian in some cultures the terms do tend to carry negative connotations. Again within Khmer culture these terms, with an inadequate description, might serve to conjure up images of children who are ‘special’, ‘different’ or ‘not normal’. It is also interesting to note that when translated into Khmer the term ‘special’ and hence ‘special needs’ the Khmer words used, are spoken in a different quality of voice to usual speech. Caution is needed when first introducing these words to ensure that a full and accurate understanding is reached.

In **Tajikistan** like in many other Central Asian countries there is a negative connotation related to the term ‘defectology’. The Commission for Classification decides on educational placement and institutionalisation of children. The focus is on the medical assessment of children often just highlighting what they *cannot* do.

In **Pakistan** the terminology in use evokes a kind of - ‘special children’. There is clearly an inadequate understanding of the fact that there is a need to give ALL children equal rights, support, respect and not just sympathy.

*QUESTION: What would be the closest English translation to the terminology in use?*

The English translations of the Khmer words used to describe the above terms are reportedly, close to the original terms. In Khmer and Bahasa Indonesia many more words are frequently needed to adequately describe concepts.

**QUESTIONS: *Is it difficult to translate terms such as inclusion, enabling education and marginalised in the national language?***

“There is no particular difficulty in translating the above terms in Bahasa Indonesia. However the translated words can be quite lengthy”. “In Central Asia we find it difficult to translate the terms in the national languages. There is a lack of understanding also reflected in writings as we see the translations incorrectly referring to children with physical and intellectual impairment”. “The translation of inclusion in Urdu language is ‘Shamooliyat’. However there is no exact translation for ‘Enabling’ and ‘Marginalised’ in Urdu and a combination of more than one word is often used.” “Of the terms mentioned the termed ‘marginalised’ is potentially problematic in Khmer culture, given that culturally the term is associated with persons who ‘easily encounter failure in their life’”.

“Consideration of the terminology used in Cambodia, and their interpretation, continues to highlight the importance of working ‘from where people are’ in terms of giving explanations of these terms. This is critical to ensure that accurate understandings are reached and that widely held, related cultural assumptions are sufficiently addressed. In so doing we work towards enabling people to ‘construct’ accurate understanding of these terms that

are also, importantly valid in their own context.”

The above responses clearly indicate that cultural contexts govern the use of terminology. We cannot lift and transfer as such, rather we need to learn by comparing experiences, and determining which word or phrase/ phrases are most appropriate in each context. We would like to continue these discussions and invite other readers to provide their views.

The above write up has been prepared by **Anupam Ahuja** with inputs from:

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## Let this Happy Childhood Last

**Elmira Sherikbaeva**

To make schools really open to all, we need to change culture, policies and practices of school life. The Index for Inclusion (Bristol Inclusive Education Study Centre-UK) helps us to achieve this. It is important to make the strategic school development plan inclusive. It enables schools to change, and experience indicates that they do so readily. They can influence the experience of students and staff through the creation of cultures in which everyone is respected, and policies and practice that are supportive for all students so that they can learn and participate along with their peers.

The Index for Inclusion enables schools to consider various aspects of school development, from improvement of relationships between staff and students to policy development for inclusion, improved assessment systems, classroom location planning and teaching learning methods. The Index for Inclusion is the connection between three aspects that could be used in making changes to the strategic school development plan.

- Creating an inclusive culture
- Development of inclusive policies
- Introduction of inclusive practices