

# Blog: The paradox of disability and education in India

*This blog was written by Anuradha De, CORD, India; and Nidhi Singal, University of Cambridge, UK. It was originally published on the [Impact Initiative website](#) in August 2016.*



India in recent years has seen an increased focus on disability in official documents, particularly in relation to education. The two main centrally sponsored programmes- the [Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan \(SSA\)](#) and the [Rashtriya Madhyamic Shiksha Abhiyan \(RMSA\)](#), emphasize inclusive education as an important strategy for the universalisation of elementary and secondary education respectively. However a challenging paradox exists where on the one hand disability discourse is getting more prominent in some government documents and media outlets, while on the other hand deeper change impacting the real lives of children with disabilities still remains distant. Rather tellingly, the [Draft of the New Education Policy](#) acknowledges that ‘children with disabilities have not been able to take full benefit of educational opportunities’. We highlight some of these stark contradictions by reflecting on the educational lives of children with disabilities based on discussions at a [recent consultation event](#) in New Delhi (India) on ‘Teaching, Learning and Disadvantage’ organized by [Collaborative Research and Dissemination](#) on behalf of [the Impact Initiative](#). We also draw on our fieldwork experiences as part of the [TEACH project](#).

## Inadequacies in formal identification & continued invisibility in classrooms

The annual school based survey - District Information System for Education (DISE) - collects data on several variables which measure progress towards including children with disabilities, such as their school enrolment rates, number of schools with ramps and accessible toilets. The Ministry of Human Resource Development in its Annual Report for 2014-15 states that, as part of the SSA initiative, 2.5 million children with special needs in the age group 6 to 14 years have been enrolled in schools.

While it is impressive that 97 per cent of children identified with disabilities are enrolled in some form of schooling, what gets overlooked is that this is likely to be a very small proportion of the overall population in this age group. Given that there are more than 200 million in the school aged population, the prevalence rates of children with disabilities in the census data comes to less than 1.5 per cent. This is a far lower number than prevalence rates reported in other developing countries such as Brazil (around 7 per cent). Thus, current rates

of identification in India are probably abysmally low, raising important questions around how to address the needs of a large majority of children who remain unidentified within and outside school settings.

The invisibility of children with disabilities is also pronounced in classrooms. While one would assume that teachers are in a position to observe and interact closely with children, our fieldwork experience suggests that many teachers remain oblivious to the individual needs/disabilities of children. During our recent visits to government schools in Haryana State in India it was clear that when teachers were asked about the number of students with disabilities in their class they focused only on those with a formal label. In our survey of 36 schools, teachers identified only 36 students with disability in Grades 3 to 5. Yet when the survey team asked selected students in these classes if they had a problem reading from the blackboard or hearing what the teachers say or moving freely in the school, more than 60 students reported facing difficulties in one or more of these activities. In one particular case when a child did not respond to any of the questions being asked by our researcher, other students noted that the child did not speak. However, the teacher seemed unaware of this and had not identified this child as having any difficulties in speaking, hearing or walking. If difficulties faced by students are not recognised by teachers, they are unlikely to be addressed or provided for with appropriate support.

### Improvements in classroom-based processes remain neglected

With increased enrolment resulting in greater diversity in the classroom, there is a lack of focus on enabling teachers to respond to the changing nature of learning needs in their classrooms. The annual work plan and budget documents of SSA and RMSA education programmes show that while schools are provided with a fixed amount of money per child to be used towards procurement of aids and appliances and making infrastructural changes to school premises, there is little emphasis on training teachers to engage effectively with the learning needs of children with disabilities.

### Reflections on moving forward

In discussing how to take these debates forward, during the Consultation, the following key themes and action points emerged:

There is a need for greater acknowledgement in policies and programmes that disability is not a discrete identity. Experiences of children with disabilities are also shaped according to their gender, socio-economic status and geographical location. Policies need to adopt a more holistic approach to addressing exclusion rather than focusing discretely on disability.

Making formal identification and assessment procedures available for children with disabilities is essential as it will enable them to access various resources and get the right support. However, teachers and head-teachers' lack an understanding of different disabilities. In a country where formal assessment is currently not easily available it is important to sensitize teachers in ways that enable them to identify and assess diverse learning needs, whilst ensuring that primary health care centres are equipped with the right expertise too.

Formal identification is essential in getting access to right resources but formative assessment conducted in classrooms can be immensely useful in helping teachers address a large number of commonly faced difficulties amongst learners. In this regard it is important to ensure that

teachers are provided with the requisite skills during pre-and in-service training programmes to use range of formal and informal assessment procedures in order to modify their teaching and learning activities appropriately.

Given the current educational scenario, which is largely marked by large class sizes, high numbers of first generation learners and low achievement, there is a need to support teachers by fostering collaboration with other professionals, such as special educators. Special educators should be trained to work with teachers and support them in responding to the specific needs of children with disabilities.

The New Education Policy is an important document for setting a future agenda where we need to acknowledge that inclusive education is not simply about increasing enrolment rates and making infrastructural changes, rather systemic support in re-shaping classroom based processes is needed. This will benefit *all* children and assist in delivering quality education.