

Educating children with disabilities in India: a missed opportunity for systemic educational reform

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Conference on multilingualism and educational challenges



Cambridge Network
for Disability and
Education Research



Central argument of my presentation

- Developments in the broader education system have a significant impact on the educational opportunities accorded to children with disabilities.
 - “spill over effect of education”
- Inclusion of children with disabilities in turn provides a real opportunity to seek fundamental reforms in the wider education system.
 - This remains a missed opportunity

COMMENT

The false allure of English-medium schooling



Anjali Mody

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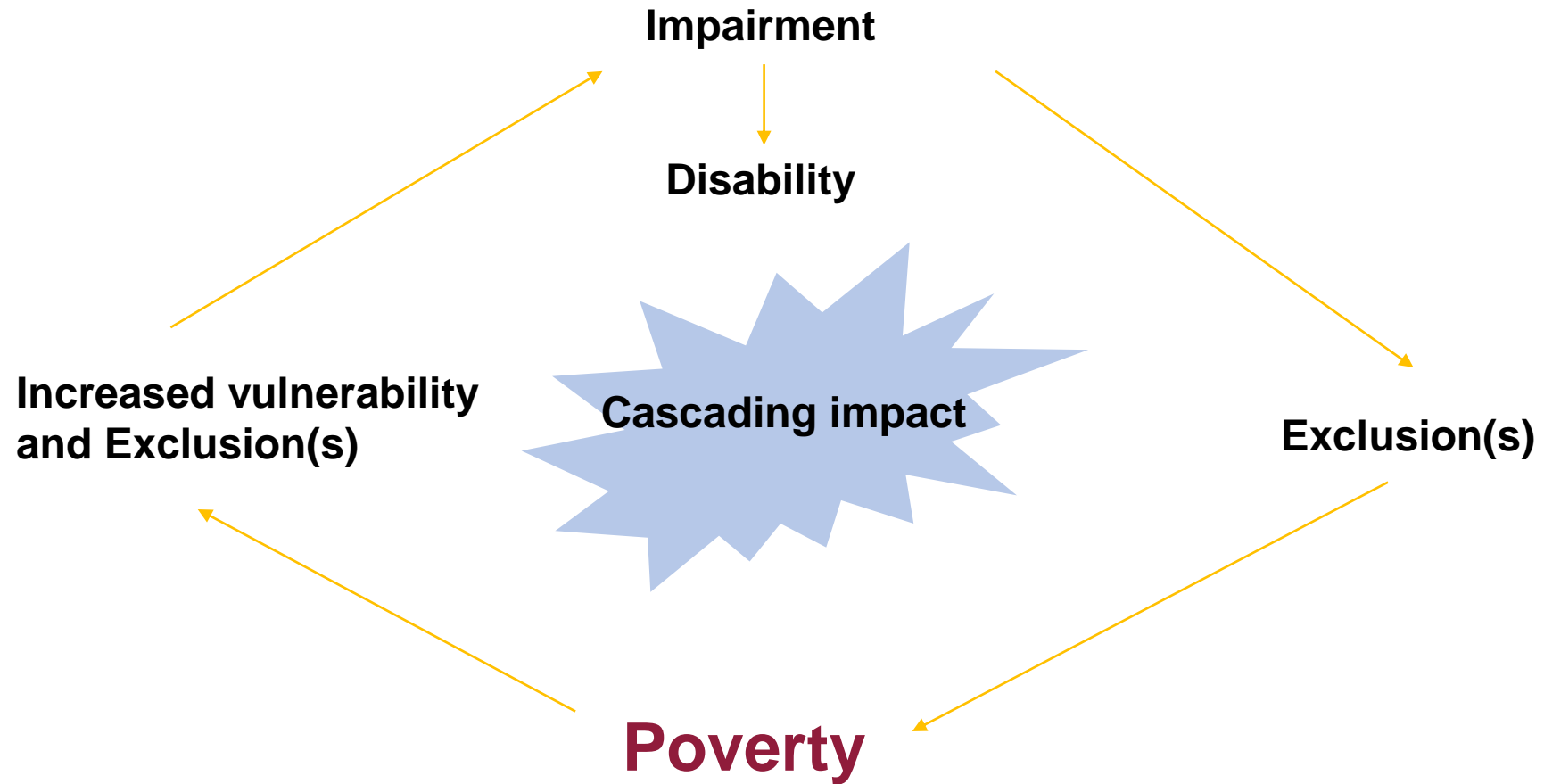
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Andhra Pradesh's push to make English the medium of instruction in state-run schools will prove counterproductive

The Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy government in Andhra Pradesh is set to make all government **elementary schools** 'English-medium' from the next academic year. There has been the expected party-political denouncement of the decision, despite the fact that it is

The problem lies not in the medium of instruction, but in **an in-egalitarian education system that is completely skewed in favour of the intergenerationally privileged**. This is a system whose design — from the annual school calendar to the syllabus and textbooks to teacher engagement to the high-stakes board exams — ignores the vastly different socioeconomic realities of a majority of children. The focus on English medium pulls a veil over these knottier problems.



Currently disabled are more likely to pass on their poverty to their children (*Lwanga-Ntale, 2003, Singal and Muthukrishna, 2014*)

India: changing scenario

Right to Education Act (2009)
Revised Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)

- Inclusion of disability in national programmes

- *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*: “universal access, equity and quality”
- *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*
- District Primary Education Programme

- Less than 2% (in 2001/02) to 61% (UNESCO, 2019)

- variations across states
- Differences- type and gender
- Decline in special schools (U-DISE data)

- Haryana: 914 households across 30 villages in three districts

- 8 out of 1211 children were out of school- of whom 4 with mod/severe difficulty
- Usually, same school as their siblings
- None enrolled in special schools

Changing parental aspirations

- Parents recognise and clearly articulate the resulting benefits of economic independence and other social benefits (Singal, 2016; Johansson, 2016)
- Irrespective of the degree of difficulty, most parents (more than 60%) aspired for education “as far as possible” (TEACH data, Haryana)

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Schooling children with disabilities: Parental perceptions and experiences

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ABSTRACT

Schooling of children with disabilities has become an important development agenda, as also emphasized in the SDGs. This paper examines how parents of children with disabilities from low income families living in a rural community in India understand and experience the schooling of their child with disabilities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with mothers. Findings suggest that mothers greatly valued schooling both for its short and long term benefits; however they were acutely aware of the poor quality of schooling on offer. While parents emerged as strong enablers in supporting their child's schooling they were seemingly devoid of agency to enable their child with disabilities to access meaningful education.

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1. Introduction

The position of parents of children with disabilities within the larger discourse on education can best be described as tenuous. Various international declarations, such as the UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which was seminal in focusing attention on the need for educating children with disabilities, conceptualised parents as “privileged partners” (p. 38) in the education of their child. It noted their inherent rights to be consulted and promoted their participation in the planning and provision of their child's educational needs. While such intentions are commonly seen in international policy discourse, their translation in practice is far more complex, and has been addressed differently in various national contexts. Even in England, where special educational needs (SEN) legislation positions parents as partners in the education of their child (Department for Education, 2014), research highlights how parents are more likely to be seen as customers or a problem by the local education authorities and schools (Macleod et al., 2013). Additionally, studies exploring parental decision making on school choice have concluded the lack of real choice for parents, particularly those from minority ethnic groups (Crozier and Davies, 2007; Byrne, 2013). These research insights are from a context where educational provision for children with disabilities is well spread. However, issues relating to the role and position of parents in contexts where state education is still not as wide spread and schooling provision is at an early stage of responding to the needs of children with disabilities, are of equal, if not more, importance.

In this article, my focus is specifically on India, which provides the basis for a useful analysis because of two main reasons: firstly, in 2009 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was passed, which legislates the provision of free and compulsory education till completion of elementary education in a neighbourhood school for all children, including those with disabilities. Secondly, India is seen as having an enabling and positive disability legislative framework, which places the education of children with disabilities (referred to as Children with Special Needs, CWSN, in official documents), as a central concern under the *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* (the SSA). SSA is the country's current flagship programme aimed at improving access and quality of provision for all children between 6–14 years (SSA, 2007).

Over the last decade or so, there has been a marked increase in the visibility of disability in the Indian context. This is not only in relation to the growing media interest and focus on disability issues as reflected through televised debates, but also the significant rise in the portrayal of characters – both children and adults – with disabilities in mainstream Indian cinema (Rao, 2015). In more recent years, in order to include all out of school children, state governments have started organising door-to-door surveys before the start of the new school year to identify and enrol all such children (Jeffery and Singal, 2008). Teachers, who usually conduct these surveys, are specifically instructed to inquire about children with disabilities. National data sets, such as the District Information System for Education (DISE) now collects information on school enrolment for children with disabilities. Therefore it is

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Changes at school level

- *Education is important for all be it disabled children or regular children. They also have the right to get educated” (Teacher quote from TEACH data, 2018)*
- Greater acceptance and readiness to engage with disability issues
- Higher awareness of state benefits



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Working towards inclusion: Reflections from the classroom

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Abstract

This article explores developments towards inclusive education being undertaken in some schools in India. Drawing on data collected through interviews with key professionals working in schools and classroom observations, the study focused on the practices and experiences of professionals involved in these efforts. Findings suggest that these schools had provided access to children who would otherwise have been denied admission to the mainstream due to their disabilities. However, these children remained the ‘included’ children and did not necessarily become a part of the classroom. Thus, evident in these schools were a range of exclusionary practices that continued to exist alongside efforts towards inclusion. I therefore argue that there is not only a need to provide stakeholders with the knowledge and skills for developing inclusive teaching practices, but also a need to challenge existing values, beliefs and attitudes to ensure the full participation of all children in the curriculum and culture of their school setting.
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Keywords: Inclusive practices; Education for all; India; Educational change

1. Introduction

Across the globe there are growing concerns regarding the large number of children who remain excluded from the education system. These concerns not only focus on the approximately 55 million children who are denied participation in the education system but are also expressed in relation to those children who are in the system but remain excluded from active and meaningful participation. Much time and effort have been expended on bringing girls into the formal schooling systems at the same levels as boys; less attention has been paid to issues of social class, geographical isolation,

religion and other forms of ethnic group-based exclusion. Even less attention has been paid to issues surrounding the education of children with disabilities, which is the focus of this paper.

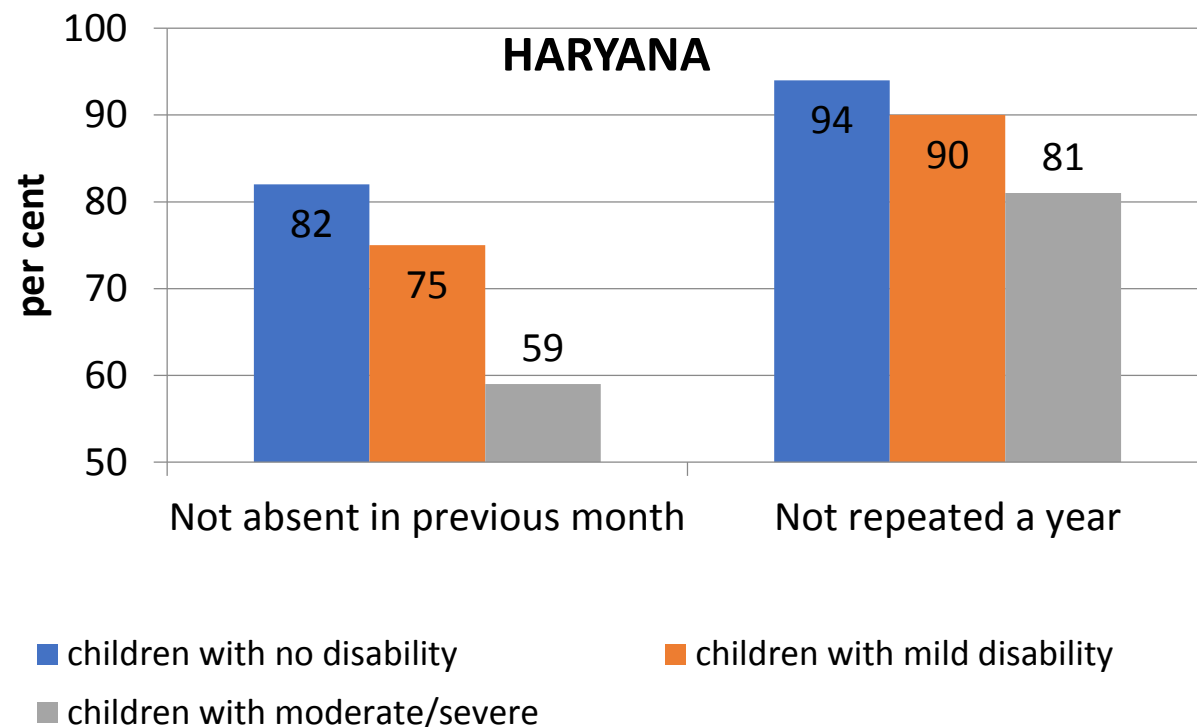
Both access and participation are the main concerns of the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000) on education. To address these issues, inclusion as a strategy for achieving the goals of education for all is gaining acceptance (e.g., Peters, 2003). While on the one hand, inclusive education is becoming part of the global agenda, on the other hand, there is growing recognition that its interpretation is as varied and diverse as the needs of children it addresses (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Mitchell, 2006). However, among the various debates there is an agreement that the focus should be on building inclusive schools, schools that

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Disengagement and lower levels of learning

- Increased likelihood of drop out (UNESCO, 2019)
- Increased absence and repetition of class (TEACH data)
- Lower levels of learning as compared to peers
 - NCERT data (2016/17)
 - TEACH data
- These differences are not natural, instead reflect systemic problems, where teaching and learning don't account for learner needs



'How' has largely addressed inputs

- Inclusive education efforts have primarily been directed at the child with disability
 - equipping the child with aids and appliances,
 - providing children with scholarships, etc.

(Data from detailed and extended classroom observations in TEACH)



Exclusion from learning, a common experience for many, but more so for children with disabilities

- Teacher covering lesson without checking if the children were understanding the content
- Leaving class unattended
- Disproportionate focus on 'good students'
- Little attention given to children with disabilities; some efforts made by a few teachers



Debates running in parallel

‘ ... children of the poor are excluded from learning not because of the absence of conditions necessary for enabling participation and learning but because of the presence of conditions of capability deprivations that are found to characterise every day classroom... ’ (Batra, 2017)

- Teachers have very little opportunity for critically reflecting on their practice (Majumdar & Mooij, 2011)
- Significant amount of time spent on non-teaching activities (TEACH data)

Concluding reflections

- There has been little focus on interrogating what it is that we are including children with disabilities into.
- ‘...the real experts of development are those who live the reality of the problems on a day-to-day basis’ (Denning 2001, 244).



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