



RTE AND THOSE WITH DISABILITY: THE SPECIAL CHILD

Since its beginning, the right to education for children with special needs has been a Prabhat priority. Prabhat's first efforts in Ahmedabad were to serve those children who had learning difficulties. Very soon, it had to respond to the needs of parents with special children --- and learning difficulties were soon overtaken by many other disability issues. Education became central to parents' anxiety that their children have a chance to grow and flower as self-reliant persons, equipped with life-skills for such growth. In many of the areas in which Prabhat works, access to education is difficult even for so-called 'normal' children for reasons of poverty, distance, lack of identity papers, and the willful neglect of particular communities and localities. And of course, some parents felt 'education' through Government schools, even if available, was useless, particularly for girls. In these circumstances, many parents and families felt there was absolutely no chance for a child with mental retardation (MR), cerebral palsy (CP), visual, speech and hearing impairments --- and often combinations of such disabilities. If the child was a girl, the hopelessness was even more severe. Many of the children Prabhat came to know had been locked away, seldom experiencing the outdoors. They were kept out of sight for reasons of stigma or shame --- as well as to protect the child from abuse, particularly if the special child was a girl. These children were often 'anamika': they had no identity in the community except as children labeled 'mad'.

Starting in the home & community

It did not take long for Prabhat to realize that the first need was to create hope within families, some kind of self-esteem within the child, and awareness within the surrounding community of its responsibility toward the special child and her needs for respect and inclusion. As Prabhat had begun its work as a response to community needs, its first 'education' task was within families and communities. This was to create awareness of special needs, to provide reason for hope, and then to bring services to the families and children that could encourage them to move forward. So for Prabhat, 'education' began in these homes and communities through awareness generation, moving on step-by-step to encourage the family to bring the special child to a Prabhat Centre for assessment, providing access to rehabilitation services through these Centres, and to opportunities for learning within a space that could be valued as a 'real school' environment that was safe, joyful and welcoming.

Education as life-skills

"Education" for the special child and her family then began with understanding and responding to the need to develop key physical and mental capacities. Education moved on to imparting basic life-skills that could give dignity to the child and hope to the family --- as well as to encourage acceptance within the community to which the child would return each day. This required strong home and community outreach, so that the 'education' within a Prabhat Centre could be extended at home (as well as to reach many children for whom even access to a Prabhat Centre was too challenging).

Simultaneous with all this, Prabhat began to build its networks with mainstream institutions, most particularly schools (including Municipal and private schools) and livelihood opportunities. It was clear that if efforts at the Centres and within homes/communities were to succeed, the challenge would then be to bring about inclusion opportunities so that children could move into the mainstream ---- into schools and/or as apprentices for livelihood training. Once again, these educational opportunities had to be preceded by a long and patient process of creating awareness and breaking down many barriers of stigma and ignorance within school and employment sectors. Once a child had reached the stage of being ready for a mainstream school or for a work situation, Prabhat had also to provide outreach to teachers, school authorities and employers so that they were re-assured that training, mentoring and support was at hand. Often, this offer of Prabhat service was the key to opening doors, making the demonstration possible that could encourage and strengthen inclusion from within both school systems and livelihood opportunities. Encouraging stakeholders to take the first risks by offering hand-holding through a period of trial has become an important part of Prabhat's strategy for inclusion.

Challenges of mainstreaming

'Mainstreaming' has its own challenges. Many teachers (particularly in Municipal schools) have no idea of RTE, leave alone RTE for children with disabilities. The first need is to understand that special children are not to be segregated into a separate stream but integrated with other children. This means that schools accept the responsibility for the special attention and facilities that special children need, integrating special needs at every stage of school planning and administration so as to achieve RTE for such children. Today, the different demands that different kinds of disability can make on the school system are little understood. For example, a child with visual or physical disability may be able to communicate with its teacher while other special children cannot, such as those with a hearing disability or mental retardation. Communication can thus become a major barrier, particularly where numbers are large such as in Municipal schools --- such children would even be marked

absent as they cannot respond to the roll call! They may not get immediate recognition and sympathy because they may 'look' normal. A child with hearing impairment may need for her understanding that the teacher physically demonstrate, or act out, a word or phrase. Special children may also need special learning materials and other aids (including emergency medical aids), for which schools need an organized resource collection, and counselors who are capable of monitoring quality and use, including of aids available through official schemes that are often of poor quality. Problems special children can have in managing their personal hygiene and toileting can become barriers to inclusion. Buildings and classrooms need to be designed for inclusion --- today, even when ramps for wheelchairs exist in some schools, they are often badly maintained or misused for other purposes.

Inclusion: some recent experiences

Some of the more elite and experimental urban schools are today making efforts at inclusion. They need to draw on recent experience where such attempts have not been sustainable. Special children have faced the double challenge of attempting to integrate with so-called 'normal' children and then facing the pain of having to withdraw from schools that have been inadequately prepared for them. What is needed to genuinely welcome and prepare for the special child demands understanding the difference between admission and inclusion i.e. managing special needs without segregation. Working closely with parents also becomes critical, to avoid the syndrome one often sees of children being unable to cope, repeating classes several times until the age difference becomes yet another barrier to inclusion, and then being moved by their parents from one school to another in desperation.

Prabhat's experience has been that rural schools can be more successful at inclusion than urban ones ---- through the mobilization of local panchayats and leaders, as well as parents. This experience has underlined the critical importance of a strong focus on community and parental involvement as a pre-condition for sustainable inclusion within school systems. Many schools are today looking for trained special educators, and these are in very short supply. It is often overlooked how much parents can contribute here. With basic literacy skills and exposure to training, parents of special children can be a huge support, as they have been to Prabhat's own educational efforts.

Role models

After several years of effort, Prabhat now has the 'role models' that demonstrate that the right to education, both school and vocational, can be exercised successfully by special children and their families. For Prabhat, it has never been whether RTE means special schools for special children or inclusion for special children in the mainstream. Both are essential. Inclusion is the basic issue and the basic right. How to make inclusion possible needs a variety of approaches, keeping mind that each special child is a special case. There can be no one-size-fits-all. Families and children need options, guidance and support.

A two-way street

One other dimension may be worth mentioning. Children in mainstream schools also need the 'education' that growing up with special children affords. One of the most encouraging experiences Prabhat has had is with mainstream schools, including the best 'elite' schools, encouraging their teachers and children to participate at Prabhat and welcoming Prabhat children to their events and campuses. For the latter, how special these contacts and exposures can be may be easily understood. What has come through equally is that privileged children have valued their bonding with special children. They have learned 'life-skills' in tolerance and caring that perhaps could not come to them through any other way. Special education has become a two-way street

Keshav Chatterjee

(Director & Managing Trustee, Prabhat Education Foundation, Ahmedabad)

13.5.12

Registered Office: Prabhat Education Foundation A4 Sujal Apartments, Opp Satellite Bungalows, Beside Sarthak Tower, Ramdevnagar, Satellite Rd, Ahmedabad 380015, Gujarat

Mailing Address: B1002 Rushin Tower, Opp Star Bazaar, Satellite Road, Ahmedabad 380 015, India. Tel: 91-978 25462191,

E-mail: prabhat@prabhatedu.org Website: www.prabhatedu.org m: 0-9825009427