

Discrimination against children with disabilities

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On 3 December every year, the International Day of Disabled Persons is observed around the world and a few days later, on 10 December, International Human Rights Day is celebrated. The two are linked in many ways as all over the world basic human rights continue to be denied to children and adults with disabilities.

Barely a month after these two days were observed in Bangladesh by the government as well as many NGOs, my attention has been drawn to a BSS news report on 6 January 2003 in which it says that the official textbook on Social Sciences, used by ninth and tenth grade pupils and approved by the National Curriculum and Text Book Board, contains inflammatory comments about children with disabilities. The textbook, which will, no doubt, influence the minds of many young people, should be withdrawn immediately.

What is written with respect to children with disabilities is both false as well as very damaging. The teaching of the textbook says that children with disabilities are likely to become criminals. At a time when educational experts around the world are encouraging 'inclusive education', here is a textbook encouraging discrimination and hatred and this very discrimination goes against the spirit of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Articles No. 15, 17 and 20 of the Constitution refer to every citizen's right to, for example, education, medical care, social security and work.

I am particularly angry to read news like this because my life has been enriched over the years by many friends in Bangladesh who have disabilities, people who have struggled through heart-breaking discrimination during their formative years but who are now holding down jobs, contributing much

to society as a whole, and taking a full part in their respective communities. My fury at reading this false teaching is much more because growing up and living with a brother and a son, both with severe learning disabilities, my life has been further enriched. Neither my brother nor my son has been able to work, but they have brought much joy and happiness to other family members and their peers.

Sweeping statements, which do not appear to have been checked by appropriate experts, can do untold damage to the minds of young people who read them in textbooks. Over 10 years ago, when I assisted in the writing of Bangladesh's National Disability Policy, I visited a number of government-run primary schools where an attempt was being made to integrate groups of children with hearing disabilities. At that time it was seen as a very progressive programme and had beneficial results on all the children, particularly on those children who did not have disabilities. They learnt how to be more tolerant and less discriminatory. Now, it seems, all that good work is not regarded as valid any more.

Anywhere in the world, poverty can drive people to crime in order to survive but there is absolutely no evidence that children with physical or mental disabilities are more likely to grow up to be criminals than children who have no disabilities.

Children with disabilities need both understanding and facilities for their education and future life. They do not need the prejudices and teachings of a bygone era to turn society and their fellow pupils against them. I sincerely hope to hear an announcement very soon from the Ministry of Education and the National Curriculum and Text Book Board that this textbook has been withdrawn.