**[Ensuring inclusion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1426134/ensuring-inclusion)**

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IS education the right of every child? Article 25-A of the Constitution says that it is, and quite categorically. Our international commitments, under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also commit us to ensuring this. And the right is unconditional: irrespective of any circumstance that a child might face, s/he has a right to education.

Does education make a difference? Most of the literature seems to say that it does. Returns to education, in the form of individual returns and benefits to family, are significant. Impact of educated mothers, on the education, health and life outcomes of their children, is also significant. And educating all children has benefits for the society at large as well.

Recently, the UK government hosted a Global Disability Summit. The event was co-hosted by a number of international organisations. Significant pledges were made at the conference, by governments as well as international organisations: hopefully, these will be honoured. A very important component of the global summit was inclusive education: education for all children.

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Though we do not have adequate data on children with disabilities, and I will return to this point in a moment, our estimates show that around 10-15 per cent of children face challenges of one sort or another. How can we have universal education, inclusive education or education for all if we are not geared to ensure that these 10-15 per cent of our children are in schools and are supported adequately so they can reach their potential?

Literature clearly shows that early identification of challenges is important. Early identification and diagnosis allows design of optimal support for these children. Later identification not only makes interventions harder, but the impact of later interventions is more limited as well. This underscores the importance of data on identification and diagnostics.

We need to know, as early as possible, if a child is facing a challenge. Currently, we do not have an identification system in place in many countries, including Pakistan. We do not know how many children face challenges and of what kind. We have small, survey-based data that gives us estimates, but this is not good enough to ensure we identify all children who face challenges.

Over the last two decades, provincial governments have invested a lot in better data in the education sector. We now have a much better sense of infrastructure provision, teacher availability and attendance, and assessment outcomes. But there has been no progress in collecting data on children with disabilities. We do not know who they are, if they are in schools or not and what sort of challenges they face. This needs to change — fast. The good news is that we do have tools available that can be added to current data collection systems, with minimal cost implications, so that we can start generating data on disability, at least for children who are already in schools.

Special education departments, in all provinces, continue to be separate from education departments and are, invariably, smaller, less well funded and very marginalised in provincial bureaucracies.

Evidence, from around the world, suggests that children with disabilities should not be isolated in separate institutions; rather, they should be integrated in mainstream schools. This is better for all children. In some countries, there is still some debate as to whether children with severe challenges should be supported through separate institutions, but for children with mild or moderate difficulties, being in mainstream schools is very important.

Some challenges can be identified when children are still in utero. Others manifest themselves early after birth and some become known in their early years. We need systems where challenges can be identified early. For this the Lady Health Worker network has to be appropriately trained. If a child is suspected to be on a spectrum, s/he needs to be referred to the medical system for diagnostics. Early diagnostics can be organised at tehsil level, where we do have general practitioners available. More specialised diagnostics can be organised at the district level: specialists are already available at that level.

Post diagnostics, we need to have interventions. Again, for most children these can be managed within mainstream schools. Teachers need to be trained to a) identify any children who might be on any spectrum so that they can be referred to the medical system for diagnostics, and b) provide effective support to such children.

Teachers have to ensure all children are treated fairly, none are bullied or picked on, and all have opportunities for effective participation. Children who face challenges will need extra support as well. This might be in the form of extra time and effort from teachers, support through peers and/or support through teaching assistants. We might need some additional support material as well. But most of these methods of support can be incorporated in pre-service and in-service training of teachers. Some of these are already present in Bachelor’s- and Master’s-level education degrees. And provision of extra material can easily be arranged within the existing non-salary budgets of schools.

At the system level, we will need some changes in curriculum, textbooks and assessment systems as well. These have to be done at the provincial level.

But all of the above requires better coordination between the current provincial education and special education departments, with some connections with the health departments. Currently, special education departments are too isolated and marginalised. They have small budgets and relatively few schools. Their teachers/experts have no interaction with mainstream schools or mainstream teachers. They have no input in the training of mainstream teachers as well. And special education departments have no input in curriculum, textbooks or assessment systems and tools.

The manifestos of all political parties have made specific and significant commitments on education as well as for persons with disabilities. We hope to see important progress, over the next five years, on the issue of inclusive education.

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