Link Between the Special School and the Mainstream School in Promoting Inclusive Education

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With first school for the blind established in Paris during 1784, journey of education of such persons in the world is 232 years old. Even after such a long journey, we have thousands of the special schools in the developing world which promote residential education. Even now, legislations of many countries aim at promoting this mode of education further. There is however a very prominent shift and many countries have now started promoting inclusive education. Most recent international declarations, national legislations and national policies lay more emphasis on "Education for All" and consider inclusive education as only alternative of achieving this goal. Article 24 (2a) of the United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) mandates that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system; Article 24 (2) (b) mandates that they can access inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis; while other sub-articles talk of reasonable accommodation, provision of support, to learn social and life skills etc.

Over last many decades, the education of children with visual impairment was considered a charitable activity and all special schools were funded managed and monitored by Department of Social Welfare. These schools however have survived and have continued imparting education to such children. Many countries still focus on promoting special education with or even without introduction of mainstream education.

1. Roles of Special Schools: There is debate world over as to which mode of education is better and which one should survive. The proponent of special school express the fear that with the expansion of mainstream education, the special schools may close down. Our experience in West Asia has established that both these modes are very much required. First of all, still we need special schools for children with deafblindness, multiple disabilities and severe disabilities, at least for the initial years. Even children from hilly areas and difficult terrains where even mainstream schools are not existing shall require education at special schools. With the expansion of mainstream education, enrolment at special school has also gone us as many children who are not able to cope in the mainstream school due to extent of visual impairment tend to shift to special schools.

There should however be change in the roles and responsibilities of the special schools. The management of special schools should be motivated and convinced to shift their role of merely from providing special education to promoting and supporting inclusive education. The Special Schools should play the following roles in this regard:

a. To extend assessment, early intervention, child preparatory as well as school readiness services including teaching of Braille, orientation & mobility and use of assistive devices.

b. To establish low vision clinics for the assessment of vision, vision stimulation, provision of low vision devices, computer aided devices, large print and teacher orientation services in respect of special needs of children with low vision.

c. To promote use of screen reading software, magnifying software, refreshable Braille, audio recording equipment and close circuit TV to transform the school for such a child as a smart school. Now a persons with visual impairment is able to store, retrieve and access educational material as effectively as any sighted person.

d. To ensure expansion of Braille production facilities, provision of open source screen reading software, internet based audio books, magnifying capacity of regular computers and introduction of affordable Braille display to provide impetus to inclusive education of such students at all levels of education.

e. To emerge as resource centres to provide reasonable accommodation and all services which are required by children with visual impairment for their access to material, academic development, recreation, sports, cultural, counselling, confidence building, personality development and other remedial activities.

f. To do advocacy to ensure protection of rights, their admission in mainstream schools, allocation of budget by education administration, making school infrastructure accessible and enabling children with visual impairment to access all concessions, reasonable accommodation, facilities and entitlement available to such children in respective country.

Thus special schools apart from improving quality of education for their own children should extend support to all such children who opt for mainstream school education. The target of such schools shall not be merely looking after children enrolled in their own schools but to support each and every such child studying under any mode of education. The focus should shift from their own children to child with visual impairment in the environment who needs any special support and guidance.

2. Roles of Mainstream Schools: Traditionally mainstream schools are consider special education in the neighborhood as competitors. The regular schools also can support and guide special schools. These schools may provide the following services to students of special schools for the visually impaired:

* Provide volunteers to special schools
* Involve Special schools in inclusive sports
* Involve blind students in cultural activities
* Provide writers and readers to students
* Record and provide audio books
* Implement student exchange program
* Mobilize resources for special schools
* Promote use of technology & software

Thus mainstream schools could also play a vital role of promotion socialization, inclusion and empowerment of students of special schools and could enhance quality of education and other associated services at such schools.

3. Role of Teacher Training Institutes: Apart from special and mainstream schools, the teacher training institutes also have a role to play in enhancing quality of education of children with visual impairment at these schools. These may play the following roles:

* To motivate Government to appoint Special Educators as teachers in the mainstream schools
* To modify curriculum of teacher training to include education of children with special needs as a component
* To Include "Disability Studies" as a paper in the teacher training curricula
* To organize visit of trainee teachers to special schools to enable them to study specific needs of such children
* To depute students of teacher training courses to perform practice teaching at special schools
* To invite students of special schools in various cultural activities and celebrations of various events at the training centres.

Thus such human resource development institutes may play an important role in ensuring acceptance of children with visual impairment in the mainstream of social life.

4. Advantages of Complimentary Approach: Instead of debating and arguing whether special school or mainstream schools or any combination thereof is better, the most practical approach specially for developing countries with limited resources would be to promote a comprehensive approach. In this approach the special schools and mainstream schools are complimentary to each other and focus on providing quality education to each and every child with visual impairment. It is up to child and her family to decide as to which mode is conducive and appropriate for a particular child. Such comprehensive approach shall have the following advantages:

* Advantages of socialization
* Inclusive development
* Building of self confidence
* Promotes sense of competition
* Enable shift from one mode to another mode depending specific needs and progress of the child

5. Conclusion: To sum up, inclusive education is a mode of journey and not the final destination or the last frontier. This mode of education not only provides opportunity for formal and regular education, it empowers the people; it builds self confidence, it promotes social inclusion, it builds capacity of schools and brings a sense of accomplishment, achievement and self realization; and in many cases self actualization as well. Let us make inclusion a way of life for all the people who having been facing seclusion, isolation and segregation under the pretext of they being "special" and requiring "special education". If special schools support the mainstream schools and vice versa, mainstream schools would more inclusive and there would be improvement in quality of education and level of inclusion of such children. Let us not compel the students to change themselves as specific needs of these competing modes of education but change the schools, change the system, change the mindset and change the environment, make special and mainstream schools complimentary to each other. Such change and comprehensive strategy would usher is new hopes, now aspirations, new dreams and new targets of achieving something which is their right and that results into "complete inclusion in an inclusive mainstream of social life".