

Educational Experiences of Children with Handicaps

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Abstract: *The paper presents an experiential account of the engagement of students with handicaps in educational settings. It begins by discussing the notions of handicaps and the role of society in creating a sense of disability. The key challenges faced by students in psychological, physical and mental domains have also been highlighted. It goes on to present four case studies of students with physical handicaps and their personal struggles in creating a niche for themselves. The paper concludes by discussing key areas in education that warrant immediate attention for successful inclusive practices.*

The word handicapped, in its literal sense, refers to a lack of an external or internal organ or amputation of an external organ of the human body. In contemporary research literature however, handicap does not refer only to the absence of an organ, it has many other connotations. It is thus important to understand what a handicap is somewhat more elaborately. To achieve this, many questions can be raised. For instance, is the mere absence of an organ or amputation of an organ actually as problematic as it is assumed to be by the society at large? Or is it just a condition of the human body? Or does the presence of a handicap render a person unable to lead a normal life? Or does it make a person disabled to the extent that his/her existence is reduced to being characterized merely by the sympathy and mercy of others?

Here, it is important to note that being handicapped is a biological phenomenon, and the term disability refers to a social phenomenon. In other words, being handicapped exists in its real sense and disability is a social creation. Such an image can be created by the person with a handicap himself or herself, by his or her family members, and/or by the society at large.

The process of socialization changes a handicap into a disability. This can be detrimental to the development of the individual. The situation does not improve much with age and experience, as

disability tends to continue throughout life. Man is a social animal. As part of social life, humans tend to be dependent on each other. This dependence and cooperation become the bases of all social relationships among human beings. Smooth co-operation among all the humans and other living beings gives birth to healthy and happy relationships in society and it helps to develop a human being into an all-round personality. But sometimes, an individual may face problems with reference to this co-operation and relationship management. Let us try to understand some of these problems. Throughout the growth years and in their educational experiences, people with physical handicaps face certain problems and challenges. These may be categorized as:

- a) Problems emanating from physical disability
- b) Problems emanating from mental disabilities
- c) Other Problems that relate to social, economic and cultural status.

Problems emanating from Physical Disabilities

Persons with physical handicaps face difficulties in maintaining social relations and reciprocal co-operation with others. In general, they tend to need a lot of help and social understanding from others. In some cases they may need extra care and facilities as well.



Problems emanating from Mental Disabilities

Some people have mental behavioral disorders, neurological problems etc. They are known as people with mental handicaps. They need special attention and care from others.

Other Problems

The social, economic environment, and cultural milieu of the family affects the social growth of a person with physical challenge. Variations in socio-economic status of families can bring out starkly different behavioral patterns and lifestyles. Availability of resources may provide an environment to a person with physical challenge, in which he/she can develop fully in all spheres. But in an environment characterized by poverty and lack of resources, the struggles can be of a different nature.

In contemporary literature, the disability discourse looks at disability in various forms including physical, psychological, social, moral, cultural, spiritual and religious etc. This perspective expands the meaning of disability to include all aspects of life. It highlights that a person can face handicaps in various spheres of life. The shadow of a handicap in the form of disability will be cast on all aspects of life preventing him or her to be free from negativity.

Another aspect highlighted by the disability discourse is that 'normal', physically healthy people also face disability in various ways. For instance, the person may have poor concentration or face difficulty in managing the personal or social behavior etc. A person with dark complexion may face an inferiority complex. I would like to substantiate how this works.

'A girl of 4th standard in a higher secondary school was rejected by her teacher for her performance as Saraswati in a cultural function of school because of her dark complexion. She expressed her views: "After that rejection I always lived in depression that If I want social acceptance I have to make myself intelligent in academics. I continue live in the stress of having to present myself better and better, and because of this notion I am unable to live a normal or relaxed life. I always live with this condition (dark complexion)." In another

example, a woman who finished her doctorate said "I stopped smiling fully since I was in 10th standard, because my teeth are very ugly, and also because of oral smell. I have always hesitated to talk with others." These are also examples of handicaps, which have prevented a person from leading a smooth and confident life.

Right from childhood a person with handicap is socialized into being disabled. Childhood is seen as a life stage during which the child is nurtured, loved and cared for by his/her parents. Besides parenting, economic, cultural and ethical values etc., also influence the childhood experiences of a person to a great extent. It is during this time that a child learns to see the world, understand the different phenomena of life where he live and experience, develop different perspectives of thoughts and attitudes, develop the ability to maintain relationships life.

At such a sensitive stage, suffering from a handicap along with effects of disability can have a detrimental effect on the development of a sense of identity. The identity of a person with disability thus becomes a mixture of self and others' views. Some experiences of children with handicaps reveal their understanding of themselves:

At the age of 3-4 years, a child with a handicap is rejected by his/her friends from their games and play. This rejection can hurt the sense of self of the child. Dhruv, an 8 year old boy said: "Children don't allow me to play with them in all games. They say that my long jump is very good with help of crutches so I always win. So they always put a condition on me that play with us without crutches. How can I (starts to weep)?"

Through observation of and interview with six year old Ankita, it was seen that during lunch time, she walks by taking support of a wall so that she is always in the position to save herself from being pushed by children running in the corridors.

During visits to ten MCD schools, I also observed the following:

- Teachers are not aware about the mental and physical needs and requirement of the students with handicaps. They always



underestimate the needs of children as future citizens of society.

- Most teachers seemed disinterested in accommodating students with handicaps in their classrooms. They looked at children with handicaps as a problem: Problems in sitting arrangement, Problems in arrangement of extra curricular activities, Problems to give special attention to them.
- Students who are deaf and dumb or blind face problems in social adjustment. They need special arrangements for studying which are difficult to arrange. Further, there is a greater problem of security, particularly for girls. Many teachers thus avoid giving admission to children with handicaps.
- Many parents experience feelings of inferiority as they are parents of a child with handicaps. In a similar manner, teachers also feel embarrassed to be known as the teacher of a student with handicap.

Teachers also expressed unawareness about the following:

- What are the laws for the welfare of students with handicaps?
- Which NGOs and government institutes are working for the welfare of the students with handicaps?
- Not only the teachers but school as the educational institution and education offices are also unaware about the agencies working with children with handicaps. This was also true for parents.

When persons with handicaps are appreciated, they tend to develop a false sense of identity. Being showered with appreciation, the child tends to forget his or her basic traits or qualities and is unable to identify his/her weaknesses as well. Such a child is likely to spend his or her life on the basis of perceptions of others.

In such an unaware and insensitive environment of

family, school and society, it's tough to create a happy and healthy experience of life for a child with a handicap. Thus, the need of the hour is to work towards building a cohesive environment characterized with sensitivity. In the paragraphs that follow, case studies of four participants have been presented.

Meena

Meena is a thirty year old woman, belonging to a middle class family. She was one year old when she was paralysed from her neck down. Although there was improvement in her condition with treatment, she has remained paralysed from her waist down. Some of her internal organs are also not functioning properly. She is dependent on her mother for performing everyday tasks such as bathing, clothing etc.

Her father is retired from the armed forces and her mother is a housewife. She lives with her parents and two brothers. Meena is the eldest amongst the siblings. In fights with her brothers, she often gets to hear that she is her given the privilege of being heard because of her physical condition, and not because she more sensible.

Meena was homeschooled and started schooling at the age of eleven when she was admitted to class three along with her younger brother. She struggled a lot for admission in middle and secondary education when most schools in the area refused admission on grounds of her physical challenge. She was then admitted to a private school where the principal did not even charge fee. The principal continues to be an inspiration and support system for Meena even today.

However the school was only till class eight, after which she was admitted into a government school. The school lacked basic infrastructure and the struggles for Meena and her mother increased manifold. Her mother sometimes had to carry her to classes on the first floor. Meena also had to wait for her mother to come to school if she had to use the toilet. She would often stay thirsty during summers. The school did not provide any support in organizing classes on the ground floor during the entire duration of her education there. During this time, she was not able to participate in co-curricular



activities owing to her physical challenge.

During school, she wanted to become a doctor. She was never encouraged by her teachers to take up medical profession and eventually pursued a course in Bachelor of Business Administration through distance learning. Subsequently, she joined a degree course in law and wants to become a judge. She was also suggested by many to take up teaching as a profession as this would help her physical condition, however, she feels that the profession is not very high paying and thus is not considering teaching as an option.

Sadhna

Sadhna is twenty four years old. She was born in a middle class family and is the eldest of three brothers and sisters. She is shorter than average and has a challenge in her left leg as a result of an injection that was incorrectly administered to her at the age of one year. She is presently working as a primary teacher in a government school in Delhi and has taken responsibility for her young siblings' education. Her parents are uneducated and her house does not have any special facilities for her. However, her family is otherwise supportive.

She is generally seen as an optimistic and happy girl. She gives credit to her parents for the same as she feels her parents have raised her to be independent. Although she had to struggle initially, but she is not adept at washing clothes, taking care of her clothes and cooking etc. Her parents also ensured that she get used to wearing a caliper by insisting that she walk regularly while wearing it. She gives credit to them for insisting as she feels it has made her independent.

In school, Sadhna was a meritorious student. She was her teachers' favourite because of her merit, ambition as well as her physical challenge. During school, her teachers often stopped her from participating in certain activities for fear of her getting injured. She was also never able to participate in sports activities during school. But she participated in other activities such as poetry recitation, debates, etc. Later, she started feeling that she was selected only because she was physically challenged and was expected to win prizes out of sympathy. She stopped participating

in activities after that. It was during college that she got the opportunity to participate and win in sports activities. She was also able to visit Panchmarhi where with every trek she felt confident that she is capable of doing everything. She feels that it is because of education that she has been able to build a status and identity for herself. Education has helped her overcome boundaries and limitations in her life. She is now contributes like any other productive member in her family and society. Yet, she feels sad that her peers often walk ahead of her instead of her walking with her when they meet her in the corridor.

Snehlata

Snehlata is thirty six years old and belongs to a middle class family. Her family consists of her parents and five siblings. Her brothers and sisters are married. Her father remains unwell and mother is a housewife. She started taking tuitions to support her family financially and had to discontinue her education after her graduation. She is loved and respected by her family. Once her younger brother started earning, she was in a position to continue her studies and is now pursuing her M.Phil in Education.

She did not face any discrimination in school owing to her disability. However, she was also never offered extra support or provided with special facilities. She thus had to make an extra effort for routine activities. Classes were often not held on the ground floor and she faced difficulty in climbing stairs. This continued at the level of university education also.

She looks at herself as an independent, confident and determined girl.

Neeru

Neeru is twenty nine years old and is working as a contract teacher in government run primary school. She lives with her parents and has two siblings. Her father is a businessman and mother is a teacher. Her family looks at her physical challenge as her destiny. Otherwise her family is loving and supportive. She is financially independent and has the freedom to manage her income as she wishes. She was five years old when she developed a



problem in her leg. Her right leg did not grow at the same speed as her left leg. Despite treatment, she was not able to recover. In fact, her condition further deteriorated due to a surgery. She now walks by using an artificial foot.

She studied in a private school where she developed close friendship bond with one of her friends who accompanied her to school everyday and even carried her school bag. Besides her friend, the teachers and non teaching staff at her school did not provide her any extra help or support in school. The school did not have adequate infrastructure that would facilitate her learning. She learnt to make adjustments herself or used to ask one of her classmates to help her with her tasks. She was never asked by her teachers or peers to participate in games or sports. Although, at home she used to play hide and seek, carom etc. with her siblings, her teachers were unaware of specific games that can be played by children with physical challenges. She also did not participate in other co-curricular

activities during school years. However, she was active in cultural activities during her graduation and post-graduation in Commerce.

Concluding Remarks

The case studies corroborate the insights drawn from observations in schools. These raise important concerns for the educational system. The teachers and non-teaching staff showed little concern in their thoughts and behavior towards the needs of children with physical challenges. Thus, they were not able to contribute fully towards their development and growth. The schools also need to work towards developing a facilitating infrastructure. The case studies also highlight that education that leads to professional independence serves the purpose of developing a sense of confidence and independence. Education also serves the important purpose of developing reflective human beings who are better adjusted. The participants showed that education helped them to accept their own limitations better.

