

Educational equity for individuals with disabilities



Educational equity means that everyone – all individuals – have opportunities to achieve their full potential. Educational equity is about fairness. Social justice, equity, respect and dignity are basic rights for all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, age and economic level. Most countries view education as the key to improvements in quality of life for their citizens and as a prerequisite for meaningful participation in economic and social activities. According to the United Nations (UN), all individuals are entitled to quality education and training (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://portal.unesco.org/education>). Education is especially important for individuals with disabilities who, for a variety of reasons, do not have opportunities to improve the quality of their lives, be educated and improve their economic level.

Inequities for individuals with disabilities

Educational inequities for students with disabilities are pervasive throughout Asia and the Pacific region. Approximately 500–650 million people who have significant disabilities live on our planet. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 10 per cent, that is 200 million, of the world's children and youth, have sensory, intellectual or mental health disabilities, with 80 per cent of these individuals living in developing countries. Asia is the most populated region on the globe, and thus has the largest number of individuals with disabilities. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), there are approximately 400 million persons with disabilities who live in the Asian and Pacific region (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/disability>. UN Innocenti Research Center, 2007).

The UN considers persons with disabilities as those 'who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). Comparisons regarding the prevalence of individuals with disabilities in various countries is difficult for a variety of reasons: non-uniform reporting requirements and data collection processes, varying definitions, selective reporting, societal marginalisation, social exclusion due to economic level or perceived status in the society, geographic isolation, religious prohibitions and cultural views (Filmer, 2008; Singal, 2008). For example, some countries may include visual, hearing, speech and physical and

mental disabilities, while others may have narrower definitions, such as a single category for physical and mental disabilities.

In some developing countries, children with disabilities are under-enrolled in schools and contribute to the 'out-of-school' children who constitute the majority of children in the country (Kalyanpur, 2008). The world-wide estimate for out-of-school children is one in five, or 115 million children, with South Asia having the largest number of out-of-school children. According to UNESCO (2005, p.21), 'South Asia is home to one-quarter of the world's primary school-age population. It is also the region with the highest absolute number of out-of-school children: 42 million of the 162 million school-age children in the region (or 26 per cent) were out of school in 2001/02. These boys and girls account for 36 per cent of the world's out-of-school children.'

In many countries, children with disabilities do not attend school for various reasons because of discrimination, family shame, lack of access to schools – especially for students who may have visible disabilities (such as physical disabilities) – lack of trained teachers, insufficient teacher preparation, family choice, forced child labour, history of exclusion, gender bias, institutionalisation of local and government policies, neglect, poverty and the effects of colonialism. Disability is closely related to, but not necessarily a cause or consequence of, long-term poverty (Kalyanpur, 2008). Although individuals with disabilities are included in all economic levels (UN Innocenti Research Center, 2007), disability and poverty are closely associated.

Lack of equitable access to education and economic opportunities leads to enormous inequalities and inequities in education for individuals with disabilities. Children with disabilities are frequently socially marginalised, and thus are less likely to attend school and acquire the skills and knowledge that lead to higher income. In developing countries, the school enrolment gap between children with and without disabilities widens as children progress from one grade to the next (Filmer, 2008). Reaching poorer and socially marginalised children is a considerable challenge for many countries.

Worldwide developments

Over time, there has been a consistent drumbeat by nations and governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that echoes the importance of equity for all persons, including for individuals with disabilities. In 1994, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement affirmed the basic right to education for all individuals

and requested that countries endorse and implement inclusive schools. Offering inclusive schooling means that all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions, be educated in the schools that they would typically attend if they did not have disabilities (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.unesco.org>).

The UN's millennium development goal (MDG) consists of eight targets, the second of which is to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Target 1 of the MDG is to 'ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling' (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.unesco.org>). Participation in and access to school are key areas of emphasis (Singal, 2008). However, it is unlikely that universal primary education will be attained by 2015, since there are considerable inequities and challenges to overcome.

In 2008, the UN issued the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which requires ratifying countries to promote, protect and ensure that equality, fundamental freedoms, dignity and human rights are provided to individuals with disabilities. However, as of early 2009, fewer than half of the world's countries had signed the convention. The guiding principles of the convention are: respect for dignity, individual autonomy, freedom to make choices and independence; non-discrimination; full inclusion and participation in society; respect for difference and acceptance of individuals with disabilities; equality of opportunities; accessibility; equality of women and men; and respect for the developing capacities of children with disabilities and the right to preserve their own identities. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities monitors, receives complaints and submits reports on the implementation of the rights that are described in the convention. Thus the Salamanca Statement, the MDG, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other initiatives all provide frameworks for countries to ensure equity and equality of persons with disabilities at all educational, economic and social levels (UN Innocenti Research Center, 2007). Through the leadership of ESCAP, governments and NGOs in the Asia and Pacific region are joining together and declaring the decades 1993–2002 and 2003–12 as the Asian and Pacific Decades of Disabled Persons. The Republic of Singapore is an example of how one Southeast Asian country is moving towards equitable education for children and youth with disabilities.

Singapore: Moving towards an inclusive society

Singapore, located in Southeast Asia, is a highly developed, urbanised country that has a population of approximately 4.5 million, with an estimated 131,000 individuals who have disabilities (UNESCAP, 2008). The author is currently involved in the training of teachers for students with disabilities in Singapore. The Singapore government does not require the reporting of individuals according to disability categories, although the Singapore Enabling Master Plan 2007–2011 recommended that a study be conducted to determine the disability prevalence rate. Singapore defines 'persons with disabilities' (PWDs) as 'those whose prospects of securing, retaining places and advancing in education and training institutions, employment and recreation as equal members of the community are substantially reduced as a result of physical, mental, intellectual

development or sensory impairments' (retrieved 20 March, 2009 from <http://www.mcs.gov.sg/enablingmasterplan/index.html>).

With globalisation, vision and leadership, considerable changes regarding the education of students with disabilities have taken place in Singapore. The year 2004 was marked by key speeches by government leaders. At his inaugural swearing-in ceremony, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated: 'We will look after the less educated and the elderly who have helped to build Singapore. And we must also have a place in our hearts and our lives for the disabled, who are our brothers and sisters, too' (Lee, 2004). Later in 2004, the Prime Minister stated that: 'Ours must be an open and inclusive Singapore' (Lee, 2004). Again, in 2004, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education, emphasised the key tenet of education as being one in which 'every child matters' and that Singapore would 'continue to customise learning to the talents and needs of the individual' (28 August 2004). Incrementally, the education of students with disabilities has become more inclusive, more welcoming.

Singapore's Enabling Master Plan 2007–2011 affirmed the vision of Singapore's leaders by stating that:

- Our vision is for Singapore to be an inclusive society in which PWDs are given the opportunity to become equal, integral and contributing members of society. Children with special needs will receive effective intervention and education services to maximise their potential and opportunity to eventually work and contribute to society. There will be equal opportunities for PWDs in employment. More PWDs will achieve self-reliance through work.
- PWDs will be appreciated and respected for their differences, and will live with dignity in the community. Families will be empowered to care for their disabled members. Parents are reassured as they age and eventually pass on, that care will be forthcoming for the well-being of their special needs children. The physical environment will be barrier-free. PWDs who are enabled through the efforts of the community will, in turn, help their families and contribute back to society.
- The public, people and private sectors will work together with PWDs and their families to achieve our vision. The disability sector will bring out the best of the 'Many Helping Hands' approach where each party will contribute in the area it is best at.

Singapore has implemented the 'many helping hands' metaphor by fostering close relationships between the individual, family and community. In education, a multi-pronged, complementary approach to educating students with disabilities has been established to support students with mild to moderate disabilities in mainstream schools and strengthen education for students with moderate to severe disabilities. These initiatives include:

- 1 training and deployment of Special Needs Officers (SNOs);
- 2 provision of additional funding for selected neighbourhood or 'resourced' schools;
- 3 training of mainstream teachers to teach students with special needs;
- 4 provision of learning support co-ordinators who can provide early intervention in primary schools;

5 preparation of Special School Teachers (SSTs) who, for the most part, teach for schools that are operated by charitable organisations, known as Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). With the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore as the significant training partner, educators are prepared to offer specific support and instruction to students with disabilities through complementary, non-duplicative roles and responsibilities.

NIE special education faculty members are passionate about inclusion; the programmes and courses are infused with the vision of an inclusive society. The preparation programme for SNOs was initiated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2004 to support students with mild to moderate dyslexia or autism spectrum disorders in neighbourhood schools. Since its establishment, the programme has been expanded to include training SNOs to support students with a broader range of disabilities. The specific responsibilities of SNOs are to offer in-class support, small group intervention sessions (e.g., reading, mathematics), small group skills training (e.g., social skills, study skills) and case management (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.moe.edu.sg>). Future SNOs are recruited by Singapore's MOE and prepared at NIE. The on-campus courses are a mix of theory and practice and include a ten-week teaching practicum in neighbourhood schools.

Initiated in 2005 by NIE, the Teachers Trained in Special Needs (TSNs) programme is intended to provide in-service training to 10 per cent of primary and secondary schools by 2010, and an additional 10 per cent of secondary teachers by 2012. The responsibilities of TSNs are to offer support to individual or small support, convey strategies and resources to parents and teachers, aid the transition of students from one educational level to another, and to support progress monitoring (retrieved 20 March 2009 from <http://www.moe.edu.sg>). The TSN training programme consists of a year-long course, divided into three 3-day modules. The first two modules focus on an introduction to special needs and classroom assessment framework and practices. The third module is organised using a categorical approach to special education, and TSNs select one elective from the following: learning disabilities, emotional/behavioural difficulties, speech and language disorders, and autism spectrum disorders.

The Learning Support Programme (LSP) is an early intervention programme targeted at students in primary 1 and 2. MOE encourages local teachers to become LSP educators and the programme provides support in English language, literacy and mathematics. LSP educators are based at neighbourhood schools and additional resources are provided to the schools in order to support the needs of LSP students.

Although students with mild disabilities are included in Singapore's neighbourhood schools, for the most part, the education of students with mild to moderate disabilities is provided by SSTs employed by VWOs. These charitable organisations are under the purview of the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), rather than MOE. As of 2009 (retrieved 20 March 2009 from

<http://www.moe.edu.sg>), there are 20 special education schools in Singapore that provide categorical education and services to students with disabilities. For example, schools are designated to provide services to students with specific categorical disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, autism, physical disabilities, hearing impairments and visual impairments. In addition to VWOs, specialised schools and services have developed in the private sector. The preparation of SSTs is offered by NIE and consists of courses that focus on theory and practice. There is a ten-week practicum that occurs in special schools.

Moving forward

An evolving vision of an inclusive society, changes in attitudes, and improvements in practices and employment are hallmarks of Singapore's approach to the participation of individuals with disabilities in educational, economic and social sectors. There are many organisations – many helping hands – in Singapore that raise awareness for the inclusion and equity of individuals with disabilities at all levels. Singapore has made great progress in achieving equity for individuals with disabilities. However, there is still much work to be done by governments, policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to reach all children and improve the lives of the 400 million individuals with disabilities in the Asia and Pacific region. While striving to improve the lives of their citizens, governments must acknowledge inequalities and take steps to address them. Many helping hands are required, throughout all levels of society, in order to address inequities for individuals with disabilities.

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