

DEVELOPING SCHOOLS WITHOUT BARRIERS

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Parents and teachers cheer students with intellectual disabilities during a race conducted by the Tamil Nadu Council of Special Schools, in Madurai. | Photo Credit: R. Ashok

“Ma’am, may I please go to the toilet?” or “Can I go play outside?” are usually innocuous requests by most schoolchildren. But for children with disability/disabilities (CWD), these are difficult tasks, due to the higher care needed to complete the actions. These actions become tougher in schools which do not have accessible spaces and other guiding infrastructure to get there safely.

A [UNESCO 2019 report](#) mentioned that CWD comprise 1.7% of the total child population in India (Census 2011). As they are faced with physical, institutional, socioeconomic and communication barriers from an early age, more than 70% of five-year-olds with disabilities in India have never attended any educational institution, the report said. Many CWD also tend to drop out of school as they grow older.

To motivate all children to meaningfully participate in all indoor and outdoor activities without barriers or limitations, the school ecosystem has to be made safe, accessible, and reliable.

Several barriers impede the participation of CWD in accessing educational opportunities such as inaccessible school buses; inaccessible facilities in schools (drinking water facilities, canteens and toilets); and inappropriate infrastructure in classrooms (uncomfortable seating, slippery flooring and low illumination). Misinformed attitudes and perceptions among parents, teachers, staff, and communities further influences the child’s emotional development.

The lack of teaching and learning practices that integrate inclusive technologies and digital equipment to engage the child, such as assistive devices, are additional challenges. At training programmes conducted by UN-Habitat India and IIT Kharagpur recently, school teachers and special educators said that accessible infrastructure within schools, such as ramps or tactile paths, are either in deficit or have not been constructed utilising suitable materials. School management authorities added that if such provisions are maintained regularly and adequate funding is provided for the construction of new infrastructure, we would have accessible places. The cooperation, involvement, and sensitisation of parents and caregivers, teachers, school management authorities, and the local government departments are required so that all these barriers are actively addressed.

[Article 21A of the Constitution](#) and the [Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009](#) outline the fundamental right to education and the right to have free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 years. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which adopted a ‘zero rejection policy’, emphasises that “every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education”. India ratified the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#). Aligning with this commitment, the government launched the [Accessible India Campaign \(Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan\)](#) in 2015. An important pillar of this campaign is accessibility to built environment. The government has also been supportive of the principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB), which is the central, transformative promise of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Anchored under the [Mainstreaming LNOB project](#) by UN-Habitat, pilot training programmes on enhancing accessibility and inclusion were implemented in two schools in Delhi with support from IIT Kharagpur and the Department of Social Welfare, Delhi government.

Through interactive training sessions and simulation exercises that encourage empathy-building, more than 400 participants, including children, school faculty and staff, were informed about different types of disabilities among children and the specific barriers experienced in different infrastructure zones of a school. After the simulation exercises, children said they will make more efforts to assist their classmates whenever they can. Various good practices, guidelines, and standards for making buildings, campuses, and infrastructure safe, accessible, and inclusive were also showcased. Even if any combination of these accessibility features is added or adapted in schools, it can go a long way in creating inclusive spaces.

Developing inclusive and accessible schools will be a big step towards not only challenging perceptions about CWD, and the associated discrimination, but also in actualising the zero-rejection policy in schools.

A multi-pronged participatory approach towards providing an enabling environment for the empowerment of future citizens is needed to ensure that stakeholders in the school ecosystem collectively work towards promoting accessibility and inclusion in schools. This includes awareness and sensitisation programmes for children, parents, and caregivers; training trainers for upskilling of school faculty and special educators and providing access to updated teaching toolkits and materials; technical training for local government departments; and a co-learning platform for knowledge-sharing between all.

Additionally, five principles — equitability, usability and durability, affordability, cultural adaptability, and aesthetic appeal — should be embedded from the planning to implementation to evaluation stages of providing infrastructure services in schools.

With the realisation of such an approach, removing the barriers to accessibility in schools will be an uphill battle, but not an insurmountable one.

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