

Enrolled, yet Absent: Children with Disabilities

Abstract

This paper discusses about absenteeism of children from schools. It focuses primarily on the issues faced by the children with disabilities and their families. It also briefly discusses the factors affecting the school attendance of such children. The concluding section discusses the measures that can be taken to limit absenteeism of children with disabilities from school.

Introduction

This paper focusses on the issue of attendance and absenteeism with particular reference to children with disabilities, that emerged from the same study.

The hurdles that children with disabilities and their families face regularly is unimaginable for others, especially for those who are not well informed about the types of disabilities that people may have. Children with disabilities are disadvantaged as compared to the others in some form or the other.

As per section 2 subsection(s) of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 “‘person with disability’ means a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others”. This clearly means that the disabled people need additional support in order to be able to fully participate in the society along with others.

Therefore, for children with disabilities to be enrolled in, and be regular to, school requires immense courage and determination on the part of these children and their families. These children are continuously at a high risk of being sporadically or continuously absent, and if not provided

with the right environment in their school, home or community, are prone to dropping out of the schooling system altogether.

Why Talk about Absence of Children with Disabilities from School?

One major reason why parents and guardians of children with disabilities send their children to school is because they want their child to learn the basic norms and rules that govern the society.

For instance, Rahul’s parents and sister want him to go to school so that he knows the meaning of school. This is despite the medical issues (Autism, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder among other issues) the child has, which makes his going to school a task for not only him, but the entire family especially his mother who stays with him the entire time to monitor his health. It does not matter to his parents and sister whether he studies or not. They primarily want their child to improve his language and communication skills. They want him to be able to interact and “engage” with others. They want him to be equipped enough to be able to live a life as close to normal as possible. They want him to cultivate the habit of getting up in the morning at six, taking a bath, going to school and being

able to do regular things like going to the washroom when he feels the urge to, and coming outside the washroom after using it. They want him to have certain uniform habits like any other child. They want him to start talking to other children and asking them general questions like “What is your name?”. The father feels that if his child could go to school everyday, he would be a little more normal in his behaviour around other people and not create scenes in public like he normally does.

Factors Affecting Children with Disabilities

Apart from the factors that have an impact on the attendance of every child, there are certain factors that specifically affect the attendance of children with disabilities. The inability of such children to effectively be able to communicate with others, lack of disability-related awareness among people, lack of empathy in people, scarcity or unavailability of special teachers, discrimination by teachers and other children in schools, inaccessible infrastructure, are some of these factors.

Discrimination

As per section 2 sub-section (h) of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, “discrimination’ in relation to disability, means any distinction, exclusion, restriction on the basis of disability which is the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field and includes all forms of discrimination and denial of reasonable accommodation.”

Rahul’s parents and sister pointed out, during their conversation with me, that there is not much interaction between him and the teachers. The teachers are unable to make, and hold eye contact with him possibly due to some apprehensions that they may have. They do not even ask him whether he did his

homework. Surprisingly, one teacher does not even call out his roll number while taking the roll call of the class in spite of requests by the parents to treat him like a normal child. They believe some teachers lack the patience and empathy required to deal with such children.

Section 8 sub-section (c) of the Right to Education Act, 2009 mandates the appropriate Government to “ensure that the child belonging to weaker section and the child belonging to disadvantaged group are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds.” Despite this legal mandate, Rahul’s family faced multiple challenges and hurdles in getting their child admitted to class 6 in a school of their choice because of which they had to let the child continue pursuing education in the school he was already studying in. Schools refused to even entertain the parents when they came to enquire about admissions for their child and those who did entertain them did it with no intention to actually admit him into the school.

Communication Problems

Rahul’s family also shared the case of the only dyslexic child in his school at that time who comes from *Saidulajab*, which is about six kilometres from his school. The mother of the dyslexic child told them what he goes through on a daily basis. Travelling to and from the school is a task for the child who is ill-treated very often. He cannot get on the right bus because he cannot read the bus number. He is hesitant in asking for help because he fears people will taunt him for not knowing the number of the bus he gets on to go to school everyday. He even gets beaten sometimes because he is not able to speak up at the right time. Some teachers too, hit him due to his improper uniform.

Dearth of Special Teachers

Section 24 sub-section (d) of the Right to Education Act, 2009 lays out the duty of teachers to “assess the learning ability of each

child and accordingly supplement additional instructions, if any, as required". For disabled children, only teachers specialised in dealing with their specific disabilities can effectively follow through with this duty as they have the requisite knowledge and skills to be able to create an environment suitable to these children.

Rahul's school has no special teacher for autism. He is the only autistic child in his school. At the time when I spoke to his family, the school had a special educator for the visually impaired who was not equipped to deal with autistic children. The special educator was not even aware of what autism means as was evident during a conversation this child's parents had with him. Rahul's parents and sister feel that he loses out on crucial years of his life whenever there is no special teacher who can cater to his special needs as has been the case for the past few years. His behavioural problems started because he thought he does not have to study because there was no special educator in school. After the special educators, whom the child got comfortable with, left, his desire to go to school went away. As his father said, "He will not follow the command unless he understands what he has to follow and what is the purpose of following it." and explaining this to such children is the job of a special educator.

Conclusion

School environment should be well structured and based on discipline and order. Schools must have satisfactory levels of hygiene and sanitation and comfortable and

accessible infrastructure. Teachers should create an environment that is encouraging and learning-oriented. They must have the support of the students, parents, other staff members, Head of School and other government officials. They must have adequate workload and access to relevant teaching and learning materials. The schools' administrative leadership should be strong, responsible and accountable. Schooling should be suited to the diverse needs, interests and potential of all the children.

A positive school environment is very important for children, especially the children with disabilities. Awareness and normalisation of "abnormalities" is necessary because that will help to get rid of the stigma attached to such children and allow them to live without the fear of being laughed at, judged, mocked or harassed. The teachers should continuously assess the progress of each child and undertake necessary interventions to help each child. There must be special needs educators for children with disabilities as required, in each school.

People need to be more aware of the types of disabilities and what an appropriate behaviour in this regard would entail. Most people in the society lack awareness and, as a result, empathy towards people, including children, with disabilities. Awareness drives should be conducted by the government and the civil society, including non-government organisations, for this purpose. They also need to ensure that teachers and other school staff are sensitised and trained to be able to deal with such cases in a suitable manner.

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