

Challenges and Barriers to inclusive Education in Egypt

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Introduction.

To reach the visually disabled and provide them with the needed services that would eventually lead to their inclusion in different aspects of life require a number of activities that would pave the way for real integration and equal opportunities. A pilot demonstration project was conducted in an urban quarter in Cairo that took into consideration the special needs of the visually disabled and was based on the "Integrated Comprehensive Eye Services Model". This pilot project is designed to be implemented over a number of phases. The research in the first phase of this project was helpful in making a situational analysis for the conditions of visually disabled before designing our intervention at the community level. The main purpose of the research phase is to assess the community based services and to what extent the visually disabled are integrated in these services.

Special Education for the blind:

The history of special schools for the blind in Egypt goes back to the year 1896 when a number of non- governmental organizations established five boarding schools for blind students. In 1927 the Ministry of Education took charge of educating the blind and established a specialized section for preparing teachers to teach blind students. However this section was cancelled in 1937. Gradually the Ministry of Education started to establish special schools in the capitals of governorates for the blind. In 1957 the ministry developed the special schools curricula to be the same as that of regular schools. By the year 1964 the blind students in special schools had the same curricula as in regular schools at all levels i.e primary, preparatory and secondary. After secondary school education they can be integrated with the sighted in the University yet they are only accepted in certain art and literary faculties. The other available option of education for the blind is religious institutes starting from the traditional preschool (El-Kutab) to the University level. Since one thousand year (history of El Azhar) till now the blind are accepted in all the religious educational system. Yet they don't have access to

the special tools & methods of learning for the blind (i.e. Braille) thus they depend mainly on others to read and write for them.

Recently the Special Education Directorate became aware of the big gap between the needs of the visually disabled and the educational services provided. Illiteracy rate among visually impaired is very high. About 90% of the blind in rural areas and about 70% in urban areas are illiterate. Special schools are centralized in Cairo and Alexandria (the two largest cities) while 80% of disabled are in rural areas. To overcome the gap between the educational services and the needs of the visually disabled a new strategy was set in 1980 calling for integration of the disabled by establishing classes for the disabled in regular schools. The outcome of this policy was the establishment in the year 2001 of some 213 classes in regular schools for the mentally disabled only. After rigorous criticism from specialists and the concern of the Special Education Directorate to serve the educational needs of the visually disabled, a new policy which supported inclusion was announced. However, the prevailing educational system for the blind till now is complete exclusion. So far only 13 visually disabled persons were integrated in regular schools in different areas by special permission from the Ministry of Education.

Barriers to Inclusion

In phase one of the Integrated Comprehensive Eye Service Project in an urban quarter (Misr Al Kadima) in Cairo, we surveyed thirty five primary schools, thirty two preparatory schools, thirteen secondary schools and twenty seven kinder gartens. We conducted a series of focus group discussion & interviews with 100 students and 80 persons at different levels in the educational institutions as well as a number of visually impaired children & their parents in this community.

None of these schools had any visually disabled students except for few low vision students who were not categorized as visually impaired. These institutions were reluctant to accept blind students and integrate them in their schools.

All teachers in the sample (35) rejected the idea of integrating the blind and 50% of them rejected integrating even the low-vision children. All interviewees pointed to laws and regulations from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social affairs which stated that visually disabled students should be referred to special schools. Although the new policy supports inclusion yet the teachers and principals of the educational institutions in the sample were not receptive to the concept of integration.

Their rejection was based on strong notions and images of what they perceive as the abilities and needs of the visually disabled. Some of them believe that the fact that the blind cannot see the blackboard means that they will not be able to follow the teacher. One teacher had an extreme misconception, she stated that "if they don't see they don't

understand". In fact this notion was repeated in one way or another among service providers and community members claiming visual disability entails mental disability.

Another concern of the teachers is the level of effort that the visually disabled students require from the teacher. They believe that each blind student would require a special teacher and a fellow student to take care of him / her. They see that it is better for the visually impaired themselves to be in special schools because the number of students is small compared to the large number of students in regular schools.

They were also worried about the kind of reaction that will be created by the sighted students. They claimed that students will mistreat and annoy the visually impaired while in special schools they all have the same situation.

Decision makers in the directorate of Education in this quarter who are already aware of the new policy of integration were willing to integrate the visually impaired in regular schools but in separate classes. They see that they need to have a different program and special educational tools and this is only possible by having them in special classes. Teachers who were receptive to integration of low vision children had already experienced having low vision students in their classes. Although these teachers were not trained on how to deal with the partially sighted students yet their treatment was realistic and they provided these students with the minimum help such as getting another student to help them, seating them in the first row, considering light etc.....

As for pre-school teachers they were afraid of the responsibility of protecting blind children and dealing with them. They also see that other sighted children will not accept the disabled and parents usually refuse to have their children with disabled ones. Moreover a large number of the visually impaired parents preferred to have their children in special schools rather than sending them to regular schools.

On the other hand the perception of the students about the visually disabled varied from one age group to another. The majority of young students in primary schools were receptive to having blind children in their classes and had positive perception of integration while older students were more negative.

Intervention

The information gained from the rapid appraisal helped us to design a number of activities that would pave the way for complete integration of the visually disabled in different aspects of life. A series of public awareness campaigns tailored to each specific group (i.e. services providers, community members, parents of visually impaired children and students) was conducted in community setting.

Raising the awareness of the decision makers in both the special education directorate and the general education directorate about the importance of inclusive education was essential because of the bureaucracy and centralization of procedures and regulations.

Another series of specialized training workshops was conducted for teachers in demonstration schools and support teachers in the special schools on how to teach mathematics and other subjects to visually disabled students.

While monitoring and assessing the implementation of the Integrated Comprehensive Eye Service Project intervention we traced a number of changes. The teachers became more willing to have visually impaired children in their classes, and those who already have low-vision children in their classes were more skilful in dealing with them. Some teachers created innovative ways in their teaching that helped the visually impaired. They become conscious of colour contrast as well as the placement of low vision children in the class and the kind of help they needed. The heads of the demonstration schools are now receptive to accept the blind children. One of the schools identified five low vision children and referred them to the association for rehabilitation and accepted them in the school. We as "Parents Association of People with Visual Impairment" act as a resource and support center for these schools. Finally this project had made some impact on the community but the real challenge is how to replicate it at the national level

Lessons learned

Underlying the numerous barriers to inclusion are some major structural obstacles that need to be tackled at the national level. The challenge facing the Egyptian education system today is to identify the school reforms, flexibility of curricula, teacher preparation and support services that are needed to create schools that serve all children

Policies & strategies at the national level have to be translated into action plans with allocated budget. Although the new educational strategy supports inclusion however existing legislative laws, regulations and procedures support exclusive. Qualified human resources are lacking among all services providers i.e. low-vision doctors, rehabilitation workers, special teachers as well as regular teachers. Funding is limited due to the low priority for disabilities on the decision makers agenda.

- The different kinds of barriers are interrelated. Hence they have to be tackled in an integrated approach

We started our project at the community base level but we found out that without addressing the barriers that stem from different levels of the organizational structure of the country, we will not be able to achieve our objective. To reach our objective of inclusion of the visually impaired we have to work both at the community level and the national level. Hence interventions for change have to entail partnership among all relevant stakeholders at all levels.

- Before intervention we assumed that parents of the visually disabled persons are for inclusive education. The research outcome reflected that most of the parents of the visually impaired children prefer special schools. However they are indifferent about their right for integration and accessing their special needs.
- We were addressing the issue of inclusive education with a model project of "Integrated Comprehensive Eye Service model" within a time span of one year. We learned that addressing the issue of inclusive education has to be conducted in the form of a process that develop incrementally over the years.