

Special Education Needs and Inclusive education in Mauritius

Permal Reynolds

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To speak on such an issue, ladies and gentlemen, is a privilege to me but it is also crucial given the current state of affairs. Our aim is to educate children with visual impairments but the problem, though glaring at us, is being tackled by the many projects initiated. The ideas are here. What we need now is action.

Due to the efforts of the Mauritian Ministry of Education and that of local NGOs such as School of the Blind and Lizie Dan La Main which promoted awareness of the problem, the national budget allocation for SEN (Special Education Needs) schools has significantly accrued in. it rose from 3.7 million rupees in the 2003-2004 period to 4.0 million in 2004-2005 and to 17 million in the previous period. This aptly demonstrates the acknowledgement of the right to education for children with Special Education Needs. The pedagogy in schools as far as children with visual impairments are concerned, with new curricula, is adapted for their situation and their education is compulsory until the age of 16 as with other students in all Mauritian schools. These are some examples of how the Government is dealing with the issue.

To induce our visually impaired children in the regular education system, a three-step methodology has been adopted:

Step one: Mainstream Integration.

At this level, children with visual impairment in the conventional schools, displaying signs of comfortable study are simply helped by the organisation with necessary commodities, such as eyeglasses or lenses, to facilitate their study. Every effort is made to avoid displacing these children from the school and to ease their scholastic development with appropriate material.

Step two: Units in Mainstream

In case of difficult assimilation of the pupils inside the ordinary class, a special unit is launched within the school premises where the former are monitored with a specialised attention. No significant alteration of the routine of the children occurs; the same syllabus, study and recreational hours being scrupulously maintained. Utilities required for the special treatment of the pupils are made available in the school itself. All this is done with a view to lessening a change in the child's daily life which might be detrimental to his or her academic growth.

Step three: Special Education Needs (Specialised Schools).

On the whole, the same programme of study as in the ordinary schools is retained in the specialised ones though some personalisation depending on the character and academic background of the pupil are carried out in that curriculum. Teachers generally handle fewer children per class to be able to follow each pupil individually and thus make sure of his or her progress. Physical activities of various sorts are given the same status as class study, in contrast to normal schools.

The following figures outline the state of things:

- 100 are pupils with disabilities integrated in mainstream schools.
- 684 children are in 14 special schools.
- 550 children attending some other 12 SEN Schools or day care centres
- And 700 children attending 16 schools set up in non-formal education centres.

But despite all this, many hurdles do crop up in the road of these children to normal education. The very structure of the class and its organisation do not conduce integration. Moreover, the ratio teacher-pupils further accentuates this problem and the teachers themselves lack training on how to handle visually impaired individuals. As of date, no peripatetic teachers have been numbered. The way pupils with full physical capacities relate to the children with special needs is still difficult as the absence of an active interaction is noticed. Also, appropriate sports amenities are not available which tampers the physical education of the children with special needs. In this line, pupils having problems of integration will be moved to specialised schools.

In these schools, most of the problems found in the mainstream institutions are remedied. There, trained teachers follow a special curriculum to cater for the individual needs of the child. Given that sports activities are central to development of any child, suitable sports equipment there and a tailored program of activities help the child to progress in a better framework.

All this said, however, the improvement and welfare of the visually impaired pupils would not be successful with a unilateral willingness but with a joint effort from parents and communities as a whole.

Epictetus said: "Only the educated are free." We all know the importance of education in the life of any individual. Education in our modern society is a tool that can aid people to escape regression or social stagnation. It represents a life that all members of society, indiscriminate of their inborn physical capacities, should enjoy. The potential exists in children of special needs. My question to you now, ladies and gentlemen, should these individuals not share a complete education which will help them to stand on their feet not only in our own country but, who knows, also defend themselves on the international chessboard. And as the Greek philosopher quoted earlier has pointed out, should not these individual be free? Especially when considering that freedom is one of the basic Universal Human Rights.