

# Work with Abilities Rather Than Disabilities

## My Experiences as a Special Teacher

Pushplata Pandey

Whenever one talks about children with disabilities, people react in different ways – some show compassion and sympathy towards them, while some people do not want to understand them at all. As teachers, it is our responsibility to respect the feelings, behaviour, and needs of children with disabilities and allow them to come closer to us. We must try to perceive their problems and learning needs and ensure that equal opportunities are provided to the children with disabilities for their learning needs and they are given ample opportunities to connect with their teachers.

Disabilities, physical or intellectual, affect learning and we should be aware of the specific needs of each child with a disability. I think that some factors clearly impact the causes of children's problems. Some of these factors may be common for all children, but for the rest, it may be useful for teachers to keep the following in mind:

- Individual differences
- Availability of supporting materials to enhance the child's functional abilities.
- Acceptance of children with disabilities by classmates and school administration.
- Individual attitude and interests.
- Overall environment of the school and community.

All these factors contribute significantly as they affect the physical, mental, social and emotional development of children. Children with disabilities face more difficulties but they may not be able to express their requirements. In such a situation, our role as a teacher becomes even more crucial.

In my experience, many teachers want to do something to help these children but do not know how and where they can get support. As time goes by and a child with a disability goes from one class to the next, the teacher begins to think of the day the child would complete his/her studies and pass out of school so that the teacher can stop thinking about the student. Some schools practice a subtle kind of elimination process by creating many barriers in the admission itself so that they

may maintain a high academic record. But it is also true that many teachers accept the classroom challenges that are faced by these children and also work with them.

### Process of identifying children

The sooner we take the necessary steps with a child with a disability, the more positive results we can achieve. The list is a lengthy one. – observing the child; preparing a case study of the child by meeting the parents, getting a medical certificate, seeking information on teacher- and child-related activities, classroom observation, paying attention to their behaviour with classmates and in the playground, using checklists and preparing Individual Educational Plan (IEP) with their help, conducting functional evaluation, getting a medical evaluation done, involving parents from time to time in the work that is being done with children, preparing small quarterly targets for achieving annual targets, preparing workbooks, ensuring activities for intellectual and physical capacity development, giving opportunities for participation in activities organised for social and emotional development, and giving responsibility.

### Parental response

A good relationship can be built with parents if they accept the physical needs of their child and have realistic expectations from the special teacher. Some parents pay a lot of attention to their children, while some others want to get rid of them. They do not understand or accept their intellectual needs, nor do they cooperate. Children have to bear the brunt of this. Sometimes the image of a special teacher in a school is that only those children go to her/his class who have difficulty in studies. One child had behavioural problems but when the parents came to know that the child is joining a special teacher's class, they were not ready to accept the fact. Even today there is a lack of awareness about special education. This can be overcome only by the efforts of the teachers who must discuss the changes taking place in the children with the parents and familiarise them with the children's needs.

## Evaluation and children with disabilities

Every child learns at a different pace and has her/his own learning style. We must evaluate our children in many different ways, such as group-work assessment, continuous assessment and open book examination. We should also design tests according to the child's ability. If the special teachers are also involved in this, then all the children and teachers will benefit. A few colleagues think that after the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, the no-detention provision of the policy means no assessment of learning. It is a widespread belief that these provisions have weakened the learning outcomes. We feel that only the results of written tests are important. But it is not so. The NCF 2005 has suggested improvements in evaluation. It specifies that assessment can identify the strengths and weaknesses of children and help them improve accordingly. We can prepare remedial learning plans for children with disabilities.

### Unforgettable Prabha

I have had many experiences as a special teacher that I can never forget. Today, I remembered Prabha when I turned the pages of memories of my past. There was a unique connection between Prabha and me. We had developed a friendship in a very short time. She was studying in grade 4 in GPS, Devpur. During class observation, we noticed that Prabha had difficulty related to her vision that was causing problems in the class and so her eyes were tested. It was found that her eyesight was deteriorating very fast. The parents were asked to get the medical examination done. One year went by in all this process. Keeping in view her low vision disability, instructional work was planned. At that time, an action plan was being designed for reading books and writing with low vision aids and devices (10+ Dome Magnifier). According to the report, she was going to lose her vision very soon due to optic nerve disease. Prabha was not told about it. We used to meet at home twice a week. One day Prabha told me in school, 'Madam, I am not able to see your face clearly today'. She told me this by touching me. It was very sad to hear this because in some situations we cannot do anything. Gradually, Prabha's vision became worse, but fortunately, her family members understood the problem and

supported her. As a special teacher, I decided to teach her Braille and she continued with her studies.

### Role of parents

Parents play an important role in our lives. They understand and accept our good qualities as well as weaknesses. The need of every child is different. Parents are expected to intervene early for the individual needs of children with disabilities and not let their disability get in the way of their development. Parents must accept them, own them in front of others and their education should be inclusive. Together with the cooperation of teacher and parents, all obstacles can be overcome, especially if we cooperate with the specialists and experts.

### Role of a special teacher

Your relationship as a teacher starts the moment you meet the children. No matter how difficult a student may be, you need to embrace the challenges of knowing him or her. The teaching-learning environment in your classroom should be positive. Teachers need to be aware of the physical, intellectual, emotional and social needs of children. Your class should be suitable for group work. You may have to face difficulties in your teaching process. Children with disabilities not only grapple with their developmental difficulties but have to also deal with the negative perceptions held by classmates or sometimes, family. You need to work with their abilities, rather than their inabilities, in the classroom. Think about how children can move on with their skills on a regular basis. They will develop gradually when all the classroom activities are in accordance with their requirement and they participate in them. Before taking individual action for practical problems, we must understand it properly. Success stories that are related to children should be shown and told. Each child is different, and the teacher's role is very important.

Everyone has the right to complete her/his education. The main objective of education is to prepare a good citizen. A school can take the initiative in this direction and it can set an example for society and create awareness among parents.



**Pushpalata Pandey** is currently working as a Special Teacher at the Azim Premji School, Dhamtari. She has 12 years of experience in working with children with disabilities, including 5 years' experience in government departments and NGOs. She may be reached at [Pushplata.pandey@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:Pushplata.pandey@azimpremjifoundation.org)