Education for All –
The Role of Schools, Teachers and Parents

P. Gomathi, M.Sc., M.Ed., M.Phil. (Life-Sci), M.Phil. (Edn.), Ph.D. Scholar

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ABSTRACT

The goal of a human rights-based approach to education is simple: to assure every child a quality education that respects and promotes her or his right to dignity and optimum development. Achieving this goal is, however, enormously more complex. The right to education is high on the agenda of the international community. Many regions, girls lag far behind. In other regions, there is a growing problem of underachievement by boys. Poverty is a key factor impeding enrolment, primary and secondary completion, and learning outcomes, and children from ethnic minority and indigenous communities consistently underachieve. Together, the conceptual analysis and the framework can be used as a resource for advocacy and social mobilization. They provide the tools with which to conduct a critical review of the current state of education in any country from a human rights perspective and to engage in political dialogue with governments and other partners with a view to adopting a rights-based approach. Schools have a key role to play in translating policies of inclusion into the day-to-day life of education. All children need to feel welcome and confident of equal treatment in the school. Schools need to develop policies to promote an environment of respect throughout the school Schools need to promote environments in which children are engaged as active participants at all levels Teaching children about their rights involves understanding the reciprocal responsibilities these imply. Education rights cannot be realized without the fulfillment of other rights, without the active engagement of all social actors in taking up their responsibilities and without a vision of social change. This framework for the realization of children's right to education and rights within education is one step forward in guiding action towards this goal.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of a human rights-based approach to education is simple: to assure every child a quality education that respects and promotes her or his right to dignity and optimum development. Achieving this goal is, however, enormously more complex. The right to education is high on the agenda of the international community. It is affirmed in numerous human rights treaties and recognized by governments as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. This recognition is exemplified in the international goals, strategies and targets that have been set during the past 20 years. The Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000, the world's governments committed to achieving universal access to free, quality and compulsory primary education by 2015. In 'A World Fit for Children', the outcome document from the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002, governments reaffirmed these commitments and agreed to a range of strategies and actions to achieve them. More ambitious targets have been established in many regions. Education was recognized as a human right, only a minority of the world's children had access to any formal education; now a majority of them go to school, and participation in formal education beyond the elementary stages has increased. In many regions, girls lag far behind. In other regions, there is a growing problem of underachievement by boys. Poverty is a key factor impeding enrolment, primary and secondary completion, and learning outcomes, and children from ethnic minority and indigenous communities consistently underachieve.

Although there are notable and creative exceptions to the rule, there is growing recognition that the approaches adopted to achieve the goals of universal access and quality education are inadequate. There has been a failure to acknowledge the complexity of the barriers impeding children's access to school, to listen to the concerns expressed by children themselves concerning their education, to build a culture of education in which all children are equally respected and valued, to engage parents and local communities in supporting education, to embrace a holistic approach to education, to address children's rights in education or to embed schools as vibrant centres for community action and social development.

Adopting a rights-based approach to education is not a panacea. It does pose some challenges – for example, the need to balance the claims of different rights holders and

address potential tensions between the realization of different rights or between rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, consistent adherence to its core principles can help meet the education goals of governments, parents and children. It demands the creation of strategies to reach all children, including the most marginalized. It empowers communities, parents and other stakeholders to claim their rights, insist that these be fully implemented and, when necessary, seek their enforcement in national courts. Education for All addresses the educational rights of children rather than adults. Not only does it focus on the right to education, it also addresses rights within education, including human rights education.

ROLE OF SCHOOLS
INTRODUCING PRACTICAL MEASURES FOR INCLUSION

Schools have a key role to play in translating policies of inclusion into the day-to-day life of education. All children need to feel welcome and confident of equal treatment in the school. Schools need to promote an atmosphere of respect for all children. They should instigate a culture that ensures that no bias is tolerated that favors or discriminates against any learner or group of learners – whether in respect of admission procedures, treatment in the classroom, opportunities for learning, access to examinations, opportunities to participate in particular activities, such as music or drama, or marking of work. Children should never be stereotyped or insulted on the basis of who or what they are. Teachers need to take active measures to involve girls on an equal basis with boys. Schools need to develop policies setting out the principles of non-discrimination and ensure that all teachers, parents and children are aware of the policy and know how to make a complaint if it is breached. Children and parents should be involved in the development of the policy as this will strengthen ownership and understanding. The process of developing the policy is also an opportunity to address the issues, learn why they are important, and develop skills in negotiation, listening and understanding different points of view and experiences.

PROMOTING A RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT

Schools need to develop policies to promote an environment of respect throughout the school. These policies should be developed through collaboration with all stakeholders,

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including children. For example, policy and guidance can be provided on: how to promote a non-violent approach to conflict resolution both between teachers and children and among children themselves; how to promote children's active participation in school decision-making processes; and how to develop school codes of behavior that govern the relationships between all members of the school community and contribute to educational processes. These guidelines can be adapted and developed by individual schools, involving children, parents and teachers, all of whom need to feel ownership of the subsequent policies.

ACCOMMODATING DIFFERING NEEDS

Inclusion necessitates action to accommodate children's differing needs. It may be necessary, for example, to ensure that some classes are held on ground floors to accommodate wheelchair users. Schools can pilot models of education that allow more flexible participation in the classroom, take classes to where children are with different groups of children arriving at different times to enable children to learn in flexible groups that take account of external demands on their time, such as agricultural work or domestic labour, although it is vital not to reduce the often already limited learning time available to them. Some schools in Bangladesh have a flexible schedule that runs for limited hours, six days a week, with the times set by local parents and the school calendar adapted to accommodate local considerations, such as harvests.115 Depending on their age, children need regular breaks to help them rest and learn effectively, particularly those children who come to school having already undertaken paid work or domestic chores. Children can work on a modular basis or in groups where they learn together in accordance with the hours they can attend, and also in tutoring initiatives that are often provided in complementary or after-school programmes.

ENCOURAGING LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

Child-friendly schools need to be responsive to the local context. Within a Frame work of core standards and principles, individual schools should be able to adapt to the needs of the local community and provide a relevant curriculum that takes account of local concerns and

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priorities. For example, some schools have made children's participation in managing the environment of the school and local community integral to the basic concept of the school as a community-based centre for democratic learning.

ENGAGING CHILDREN AS PARTNERS

Schools need to promote environments in which children are engaged as active participants at all levels as peer educators and mentors for younger children; in setting up and running school councils that act as a forum for addressing children's concerns; in helping develop school policy, including behaviour codes and discipline; in advising on such issues as playground design, and location and design of latrines; in contributing to the curriculum; in providing feedback and evaluation on the curriculum and teaching methods; as mediators helping resolve conflicts; and in participating on school governing bodies. One approach to creating a participatory environment is to employ the use of 'circle time', a process whereby children come together each day in a circle to discuss issues of concern to them, identify problems and explore solution Children can also be involved in establishing the indicators used to monitor how well a school is respecting the rights of all its members, and they can take part in a process of regular evaluation of compliance with those indicators. They can then share in the responsibility of developing strategies for improving practice. In all these strategies, efforts need to be made to ensure equal opportunities for participation by all children.

THE SCHOOL UNDER THE MANGO TREE

The Sementinha, or school under the mango tree, was first established for 4- to 6-year-olds in a city in Brazil in response to the many young children not attending school. The methodology is based on the ideas of circle and play. Each day starts with the children sitting in a circle and being asked, "What shall we study today?" Participation is a fundamental principle and all children, regardless of age, have a right to contribute. Initially, they were unable to express themselves, but with encouragement from the teachers, they gradually built up confidence and began to put forward opinions. All group questions are resolved in a circle, which is a space for talking, listening, arguing, reflecting and reaching

consensus. In this way, children do not feel excluded if their ideas are rejected. The children also have a role in assessing the activities. This is done through verbal discussion, as well as drawing, singing, creating stories and writing poems. The children's feedback is taken seriously by the teachers and informs future activities. The teachers also meet in a circle before school begins to discuss their plans, and again at the end of the day to review the activities that have taken place. Our government may also follow such innovative practices for the enrolment of children in the schools.

ROLE OF SUPPORTING SCHOOLS

Local community members can generate critical advocacy for education and raise resources to improve school facilities. They can contribute financial support, organize fund-raising activities, join school governing bodies, support community based curricula activities, contribute to 'working parties' to maintain the school environment, campaign for improved funding, help adapt school buildings so they are more accessible for children with disabilities and encourage the elimination of child labour in their communities. The active involvement of the local community raises the status of the school and lends support to a perception that education is important and must be valued and protected for all children. However, it needs to be recognized that communities are not homogeneous. Efforts to promote community involvement should include poor and marginalized households, and particular efforts may be required to achieve that goal.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

While the wider educational infrastructure is vital, it is teachers who have the most impact on the day-to-day experience of children in school. A quality education, in which children want to take part, is dependent on the commitment, enthusiasm, creativity and skill of teachers. It is their task to translate national policies into practical action in each school and to ensure that they embrace a culture that is inclusive and respectful of every child. While governments have responsibility for setting the terms and conditions of teachers' work and for promoting a culture of respect for their work, much can be done at the local level to uphold the rights of teachers. Head teachers have responsibilities for advancing teachers'

rights, providing appropriate support, addressing concerns, involving teachers in decision-making in the school and promoting respect for their work in the local community. They also need to help teachers understand their roles and responsibilities and monitor their behaviour. They should demonstrate their willingness to respect the rights of children.

ROLE OF PARENTS
PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Many parents lack the skills, knowledge and resources to interact effectively with teachers and school authorities, while on the part of schools there is often a lack of commitment to reach out to parents. Yet, investment in parents may be as important in the education of a child as the direct learning in school. Schools need to organize regular meetings of parents to share with them the goals of the school, the curriculum that is being taught and updates on the child's progress to enable them to better understand the child's education. Such contact enlists parents as partners in the educational process. Schools can also encourage parents to assist in the classroom, help out in the wider school environment and become members of school boards. Their involvement not only leads to the contribution of practical skills and energy but also increases the sense of ownership of the school, and with it a commitment to children's effective education. Local groups, such as parents' associations or mothers' clubs, are vital in supporting children's education. Through cooperative organizing, parents can become effective advocates for improved standards and provision. They can work to support the school, monitor children's progress and hold the school to account on its achievements. Such clubs and associations can also play an important role in capacity-building because they create opportunities to develop skills in organizing committees, fund-raising, public speaking and networking.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, education rights cannot be realized without the fulfillment of other rights, without the active engagement of all social actors in taking up their responsibilities and without a vision of social change. This framework for the realization of children's right to education and rights within education is one step forward in guiding action towards this

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goal. It is anticipated that it will be used by governments, UN agencies, non-governmental

organizations and donors in their ongoing work to achieve Education for All.

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P. Gomathi, M.Sc., M.Ed., M.Phil. (Life-Sci), M.Phil. (Edn.), Ph.D. Scholar
Assistant Professor of Biological Science Education
Dr. N.G.P. College of Education
Coimbatore - 48
Tamilnadu
India

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
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