

Inclusion and Education for All: Necessary Partners

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Abstract

Education for All (EFA) is the major educational reform of the early 21st century, and it provides a backdrop against which all other educational movements must be viewed. This applies to inclusive education no less than to other educational developments. This paper explores the relationship between inclusive education and EFA. It challenges the view that including pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools is an obstacle to the achievement of Education for All and argues to the contrary that appropriate efforts to provide high-quality education for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools can make a major contribution to securing EFA.

Education for All has been on the agenda for many years now. It is sobering to recall that as long ago as 1948 the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that ‘Everyone has the right to education.’ Article 26 of the Declaration goes on to require that elementary education should be both compulsory and free. More than half a century later this Declaration is no less challenging than it was in the 1940s. There have been enormous efforts and some successes in the intervening years but, globally, progress has been fitful. In the 1980s some of the world’s poorest countries suffered major setbacks in the achievement of basic education. More than 100 million children were estimated to have had no access to primary education and nearly one billion adults were deemed to be illiterate during this decade.

The World Conference on Education for All which took place in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 promulgated an ambitious vision of meeting basic learning needs for everybody. It agreed a framework for action and sought concrete measures for turning the longstanding rhetoric into effective educational provision. This was followed by a number of events during the 1990s including the Salamanca conference and declaration on special needs education (1994) and the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (1997).

Progress remained limited, however, and a further world conference was held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000. This was a gathering of 1,100 participants from 164 countries and led to the Dakar Framework for Action *Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments* (UNESCO, 2000). This is the most up-to-date and authoritative statement of global aspirations regarding Education for All. It is couched in terms of six goals:

1. *Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children*
2. *Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality*
3. *Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes*
4. *Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults*
5. *Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality*
6. *Improving every aspect of the quality of education, and ensuring their excellence so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.*

These targets are at the heart of the campaign driven by UNESCO and backed by the World Bank and the G8 Summit. They are supported by national policies in many countries and by substantial investment from both national and international resources. It is not difficult then to see that these targets and the associated campaign provide an essential context for inclusive education. To the extent that inclusive education is about providing basic education to groups of children who have hitherto had only intermittent access to it, it is an integral albeit problematic element of EFA.

There is a difficulty, however. EFA is extremely challenging and the Dakar targets are unlikely to be met in many countries. It could be argued therefore that inclusive education, though desirable, is a needless complication and that a focus on it will delay the achievement of EFA yet further.

Before tackling this argument, it is worth noting the scale of the EFA challenge. The World Education Forum meeting in Dakar in 2000 agreed a mechanism for monitoring progress toward the EFA targets, and it is anticipated that annual reports will be produced. The most recent report (UNESCO, 2002) paints a sobering picture. So far as the second goal, on universal primary education, is concerned, 57 countries who between them account for a large proportion of the world's population are considered unlikely to reach the goal by 2015. Some 41 of these countries are deemed to be moving away from the goal in that pupil enrolment rates are dropping. Unless there is drastic change therefore, it is clear that this target will not be met and that many of the world's children will in 2015 still not be receiving the education declared to be a universal human right in 1948.

There is logic in arguing for a reduced emphasis on inclusive education in this context. If resources are limited and challenging targets are to be met, it makes sense to direct resources to those areas and individuals where the likelihood of success is greatest. This could be taken to mean focusing on academically able children in the first instance and setting aside those who have difficulty in learning until a later date.

There are two major difficulties with this argument, one a matter of principle and one an empirical matter. The issue of principle is easily dealt with. EFA means education for **all**, not education for some! Nobody has proposed that we scale down the targets by excluding certain groups, and unless and until that happens the target remains education for all. There are longstanding and widely accepted issues of equity and individual rights here which link entitlement to need, for instance. In this principled view, relegating pupils with disabilities to the back of the educational queue – and thereby denying the human rights of a generation of children – is not acceptable, for all that it represents current reality in many countries.

This human rights perspective may be persuasive at the level of principle but, clearly, something more is needed. The world at large is not persuaded by the human rights argument. Indeed, many in education are not convinced that the place for children with disabilities is with their peers even if they accept that they should be educated.

A different perspective comes from examining the role of education in development. This is argued most powerfully by Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* (1999). A Nobel laureate in economic science, he turns conventional economics on its head with a profound critique of current debates on liberty and market forces. He marshals data and argument on a very broad canvas to demonstrate the central role of education in economic and social development, thereby providing an empirical underpinning for investment in EFA and inclusive education.

Sen's starting point is the centrality of freedom. His central argument is that development and freedom are intimately, and inescapably, linked, at two levels: constitutive, and instrumental. First, freedom is an essential part of what we mean by development; in other words, it *constitutes* development, and the expansion of freedom is the primary purpose of development. Indeed, he describes his book as 'mainly an attempt to see development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (p. 36). These freedoms can be couched in both negative and positive terms: freedom from poverty and hunger, freedom from ignorance, freedom from oppression, but also the freedoms associated with being literate and numerate and having access to cultural resources, being able to make choices in significant areas of life, enjoying political participation and uncensored expression. Without these freedoms a society and the individuals within it cannot be said to be developed. This perspective rejects the narrow view of development that equates it with economic or industrial advancement. Thus, a rich country which does not have due political process or a well-educated citizenry is not to be regarded as developed since it lacks features which are intrinsic to developed status.

Secondly, there is an *instrumental* link between freedom and development, which is central to the argument about EFA and inclusion. Sen maintains that freedom is the principal means by which development is achieved. This is not simply the near-tautological point that follows from defining development in terms of human freedom since of course the expansion of freedom then constitutes development. It is the far larger, empirically derived point that the different kinds of freedom interrelate with one another and freedom of one kind may help in advancing freedoms of other kinds.

He identifies five types of freedom which are important in this instrumental perspective: political freedoms and civil rights; economic facilities including access to finance, the opportunity to trade and generally the capacity to use economic resources; social opportunities including, in particular, arrangements for education and healthcare; transparency guarantees that ensure adequate standards of openness and disclosure in transactions so that society can operate on some basic presumption of trust; and protective security whereby vulnerable members of society are afforded a social safety net. Even though these freedoms are quite distinct from each other – and often seen as pertaining to unrelated sectors of society – they are closely linked, supplementing and reinforcing each other in numerous ways.

So far as education is concerned, it is clearly associated with all of the other freedoms and is thereby a crucial agent of development. Education contributes to political enfranchisement, economic development, the creation of fiduciary transactions, reductions in mortality rates and so on. Sen cites numerous examples of this generative power of education and demonstrates powerfully that investment in education is not a luxury that can be postponed until a country is rich or economically developed. To the contrary, such development is essential to achieving developed status. The more it is delayed, the longer a country or region will take to develop – and may not do so at all.

Sen does not speak of EFA as such but his discourse on education, and more pointedly his examples, are predicated on expanding education to the whole population. He cites Japan as ‘the pioneering example’ of enhancing economic growth through investment in basic education and argues that the rapid development in East Asian economies in the 1980s was similarly fuelled by the human resource development that followed from mass education. These countries are contrasted with other Asian countries as well as with African and South American ones where the availability of and enrolment in basic education have been limited.

We have then a powerful argument in favour of investing in basic education for the whole population. It is an argument that does not depend on charity or human rights or notions of equality. These have their place but are perhaps less persuasive to those outside the education sector. There are many calls on public expenditure and, if basic education is to secure an adequate share of finite resources, it is necessary to have arguments that appeal to rational self-interest. This is precisely the thrust of Sen’s development position: countries will only achieve economic and other development if they secure certain freedoms for their people, especially the freedoms and human development that follow from mass basic education. (This is not of course to deny the intrinsic value of education as a good in its own right but to emphasise its unique instrumentality in creating the social opportunities that facilitate development.)

The final part of the argument has to do with the role of inclusion in basic education. As noted above, EFA means education for all and must therefore encompass children with disabilities and learning difficulties. Segregated education is of course a possibility but it is expensive and often not affordable, has not been shown to be particularly effective, and is not necessary except perhaps in a very small proportion of cases. The amount of attention given to the segregation/integration debate has indeed been quite excessive and has distracted attention from the key requirements of

reforming and expanding basic education. Some segregated provision may continue to be necessary for children with severe and complex needs but the substantive imperative is to build up provision for all children in regular schools. Unless that happens, national commitments to EFA will not be met.

There is, however, a further and stronger link between EFA and inclusion. EFA is not just about numbers. A neighbourhood might have every child attending the local school without achieving EFA! EFA is **education** for all, and until high-quality, appropriate education is on offer for every child the target is not being met.

Inclusive education has a uniquely valuable contribution to make here. Inclusive education, properly understood, is precisely about reforming schools, or creating new schools, where children who have hitherto been excluded or marginalised now receive an appropriate education. To that extent it is critical to EFA since, without it, a group of children is excluded from education and Education for All cannot by definition be achieved. But this is about more than just the numerically small proportion of children with disabilities and learning difficulties. Historically, many schools in the north as well as in the south have done a poor job in educating the 20 or 30 per cent of pupils who come at the bottom of the academic ladder. Repeated experience is that a major impact of inclusive education is precisely on this group of pupils: teachers become more aware of their learning needs, and better equipped in terms of resources, teaching skills and attitudes to meet them. Schools which transform themselves to meet the educational needs of pupils with disabilities generally manage to provide an effective learning environment for many other pupils as well. This is why inclusive education is important for EFA, indeed lies at its very heart. Schools and districts which take inclusive education seriously are far more likely to meet the target of effective primary education for every child in the neighbourhood.

The beneficial impact is in fact two-way. Just as inclusive education contributes to EFA, it also benefits enormously from it. The framework for EFA and the climate within which it is being progressed are strongly supportive of inclusive education. The language of the Goals with its emphasis on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children provides a natural framework for implementing inclusive education.

Indeed, it should not be forgotten that EFA is central to education policy at national and indeed global levels. It is the arena for educational reform efforts and for decisions on education expenditure worldwide. Topics which fall outside EFA are unlikely to receive as much attention as those which are clearly seen to be integral to it. It behoves us, therefore, to ensure that inclusive education is recognised to be a central part of the EFA agenda. In that way the educational interests of children with disabilities and learning difficulties will be advanced in step with progress toward the EFA goals.

References

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