

# BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Mitu De\* and Indrani Basu\*\*

## ABSTRACT

*Individuals with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulties in three core areas, viz., difficulty in social and emotional interaction; difficulty in communication and language, both verbal and non verbal; difficulties in imagination and flexibility of thought. Though the areas of impairment are the same yet the degree differs. When autistic individuals are admitted in an inclusive educational institution, the support they require should be different for each individual student. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, entitles all children to have the right to education as a Fundamental Right. All children including those with disability have the right to education. Regardless of their ability in an inclusive education setting, all children are enrolled in the mainstream classroom. Inclusive education can empower learners, combat discrimination, celebrate diversity, encourage and promote more inclusive societies. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 states that all disabled children between the age group of 6 and 18 years shall have the right to free education'. So that implies that all classrooms must be equipped with the support needed for children with special needs. But inclusive education without the right kind of support causes barriers to education. Classrooms are social environments where individuals with ASD may find different degrees of difficulties in communicating, interacting or socialising. Inclusive education for individuals with autism spectrum disorder should begin with the first step of understanding this invisible disability. Likewise, the support needed for the student to overcome the barrier to education should be specific to the needs of the individual. In this paper, few common types of difficulties that autistic individuals may face in educational institutions are listed. Some of the attitudinal and social support strategies required by students with ASD which may help in removing these difficulties or barriers in the education process are also discussed.*

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Botany, Gurudas College, Kolkata. Email id- [mituaswb@gmail.com](mailto:mituaswb@gmail.com)

\*\* Director, Autism Society West Bengal (ASWB), Kolkata. Email id- [indranibasus55@gmail.com](mailto:indranibasus55@gmail.com)

## **1. Introduction**

Over the past few years, there have been several initiatives at the global level for visualising and incorporating strategies for imparting quality education for differently abled children. The term ‘inclusive education’ has become common and most educational institutions strive to be inclusive. Seats are reserved for differently abled students in educational institutions now so as to enable the differently abled individuals to get quality education.

The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was a milestone in this regard. Article 24 of the UNCRPD focuses on the urgent need for governments to ensure equal access to an “inclusive education system at all levels” and to provide realistic support services to persons with disabilities to facilitate their education, with a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

However, as there are different types of disabilities in an inclusive educational set up, the support system should also be varied. In case of some disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder where the impairment itself is varied among different individuals the support of ‘special need’ for the students should be varied.

## **2. Some observations**

Given below are experiences of 10 (ten) autistic students,<sup>2</sup> some of whom are school students. Though apparently they seem discrete incidents and experiences, there is an invisible thread of similarity among all experiences.

1. Arvind is a young boy of eight years studying in standard III. He enjoys going to school and is quite good in studies, especially in mathematics. However, he does not have any close friends. He feels that his classmates only talk to him when they need his help in their studies. He always feels alone in the crowd.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The names of the respective students have been changed for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality.

2. Ritwesh is a young adult studying in his second year undergraduate course in a reputed college in the city. He is very curious and everyday he asks the teachers several questions during the course of the lectures. At the start of the session, most of his teachers encouraged him to ask questions. So, he started asking several questions during the 45-minute lecture duration, every day. To his disappointment, nowadays, most of his teachers tell him to ask his queries after class.
3. Irfan's parents had hoped to send their only child to an elite boarding school so that he receives quality education. But two-year-old Irfan has not started talking yet and this is a matter of great concern to his parents. They have also noticed that Irfan does not like playing with kids of his age. Instead, he seems to enjoy the company of children several years his senior. After many visits to various doctors, he was diagnosed having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)<sup>3</sup>.
4. Julie is a shy girl of six. She studies in standard II. She can sing beautifully and loves to arrange her toys neatly in a row. She likes to repeat whatever another person utters. This makes life difficult for her mother as she constantly repeats everything. But her mother is pleased that Julie always likes to keep all objects in their assigned places. She always wants everything in order and seems to enjoy routines. One day, her elder cousin visited and he messed up with her toys. Her mother was shocked because Julie created such a fuss, cried and rolled on the floor and later started banging her own head on the wall. The aftereffect of this incident seemed to last several weeks as Julie refused to go to school for three weeks.
5. Mainak, a 10-year-old autistic boy goes to a school that supports inclusive education. Because he has special needs, he has to go to his special educator in the resource room a few times in a day. Mainak feels he understands whatever the teacher is teaching, however, when they question him he finds himself tongue tied. Just because he cannot articulate the answers, his teacher thinks that he has not been able to grasp the concept of that day's lesson. Mainak finds himself back in the resource room where he has to go over the concepts that he already knows.

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<sup>3</sup> Autism Spectrum Disorder 299.00 (F84.0) (DSM-V, American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Retrieved from Autism Speaks: <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/diagnosis/dsm-5-diagnostic-criteria>).

6. Nilesh, a one-and-half-year-old boy has what was earlier called as ‘high functioning autism’ or HFA<sup>4</sup>. He went through intensive intervention therapy in a reputed facility. He progressed well and his parents were advised to enroll him in a mainstream school. To his parents’ horror, several schools refused to admit him stating that even though they admitted differently abled students they did not have adequate support system to handle students with ‘high functioning autism’. After facing refusal from six schools, Nilesh’s parents did not disclose about Nilesh’s condition and got him admitted to a well-known school.
7. Anurag, a five-year-old boy goes to a reputed inclusive school. His teachers noticed that he had trouble following the verbal instructions of his teachers. Furthermore, he had difficulties transitioning from one subject to the other during the course of the day. The school Principal told the parents to hire a ‘shadow teacher’ for Anurag. The shadow teacher was experienced with many of the teaching methods for autistic individuals.<sup>5</sup> She incorporated many strategies within Anurag’s existing curriculum. With positive collaboration among the teachers, Anurag learnt to cope with the class load.
8. Rudrapalash is an 11-year-old non-verbal autistic boy. He has been going to a special school only meant for autistic students for six years. His teachers use various teaching methods such as Applied Behaviour Analysis<sup>6</sup> and Verbal Behaviour Analysis. Further, Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) method is implemented in his classroom. The TEACCH program<sup>7</sup> provides community-based services to children with autism and related disorders from preschool

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<sup>4</sup> Earlier the term ‘high functioning autism’ or HFA was used for individuals who were cognitively less challenged and had the ability to speak, read and write. But according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), 2013 that provides standardised criteria to help diagnose ASD, the term HFA is no longer used.

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education (2007). Effective educational practices for students with autism spectrum disorder, A resource guide. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.

<sup>6</sup> LOVAAS IVER OLE, TEACHING INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS: BASIC INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES. (2003).

<sup>7</sup> The program was developed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Schopler, E., Mesibov, G., & Hearshey, K., *Structured Teaching in the TEACCH System*, in LEARNING AND COGNITION IN AUTISM 243-268 (E. Schopler & G. Mesibov eds., 1995).

age till adulthood. Schedules, Visuals, Work Stations are a part of his class. His class teachers make Individual Educational plans (IEPs) for all their students. He is happy when he is in school. He understands what is expected from him by looking at the visual cues. He participates in annual concerts and school picnics with gusto.

9. Arunika, a seven-year-old autistic girl goes to a special school meant only for autistic children. She likes to paint, sew and do clay modeling. She has an IEP in class and the TEACCH program is implemented in her class by trained special educators. Even though she can speak, she talks very rarely. She has a younger brother, Sagnik, who was also on the autism spectrum. He started his intervention from the age of one year and four months. He responded very well and has joined a mainstream school. Sometimes he finds it difficult to understand the concepts of some of the topics taught in class. So he comes for monthly counseling sessions. The special educators explain the concepts visually with lots of diagrams. Then he grasps the concept easily and it becomes hard to forget.
10. Rishi has just completed his post graduation in Botany. Though he has sufficient knowledge of his subject, his post graduation marks are not very good. He now realises that he did not attempt all the questions in this Final exams as he was busy writing an in-depth answer to some short questions. He had forgotten to do the time management procedure despite his teachers narrating him the procedure before the examinations. He understands that he needs a job and also understands that all types of jobs will not suit him. He hopes that one day he will get a job where there is minimum contact with his employer and other employees. He knows that he makes a fool of himself in social gatherings. But he is ready to adjust and learn. He knows that he has a diagnosis of ASD.

In the above ten examples though there are huge differences in the experiences, all the students were autistic and had a 'triad of impairment,' viz., Social impairment; Verbal and Non-Verbal language impairment; difficulties in flexibility of thought leading to repetitive activities. The degree of impairment varies. As their needs are different, the support that they will require in educational institutes will be different.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM (2001).

Children with disabilities represent more than one-third of the 67 million children who are out of school worldwide as estimated by UNESCO in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Inclusive education is fundamental for tapping the human resource potential of all students and also for achieving better quality in education. In an inclusive classroom we expect to see students with different learning styles and abilities. Inclusive education should ideally use teaching methods and strategies that cater for diverse learning styles of all students.

Originating from the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which Ainscow and Cesar (2006) referred to as “the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education” (p.231),<sup>10</sup> inclusive education received extensive recognition across the world, including in developing countries such as India. The Salamanca statement eventually gave birth to the most promising international instrument, the UNCRPD 2006,<sup>11</sup> promoting inclusive education rights for the disabled.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD mentions that education shall be made available to all without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. The provision creates an obligation on the governments to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels. This concept of inclusive education has been later incorporated into various international and national declarations, policies and Acts.

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<sup>9</sup> UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007, p. 74. UNESCO, Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2011, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ainscow M. & Cesar M., *Inclusive Education Ten Years after Salamanca: Setting the Agenda*. EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION, XXI, 3, 231-238 (2006).

<sup>11</sup> India is a signatory to the UNCRPD.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>12</sup> were a stance against hunger, disease, poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women by world leaders. The MDGs were established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, following the adoption of the MDGs. The first step towards ensuring that persons with disability benefit from the MDGs. The MDGs was primarily to identify the factors that cause a barrier to their inclusion process in various programs and policies based on the MDGs.

In India, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, entitles all children to have the right to education as a fundamental right. All children including those with disability have the right to education. Regardless of their ability in an inclusive education setting, all children are allowed to be enrolled in mainstream classrooms making the cause of inclusive education, which can empower learners, combat discrimination, celebrate diversity, encourage and promote more inclusive societies, being promoted to a higher level. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 came into effect in late December 2016, after almost a decade's wait. The Lok Sabha passed it on 6<sup>th</sup> December and the Rajya Sabha on 14<sup>th</sup> December. The Act has replaced the Persons with Disability (PwD) Act of 1995. Under the newly enacted Act, disability has been defined based on an evolving and dynamic concept. The types of disabilities have been increased from the existing seven to 21.

In the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 it is stated that 'Every child with benchmark disability between the age group of 6 and 18 years shall have the right to free education', salient feature no. vii.<sup>13</sup> So that implies that all classrooms must be equipped with the supports needed for children with special needs.

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals website, retrieved from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report>

<sup>13</sup> Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill-2016. Press Information Bureau Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. Retrieved from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease>.

But inclusive education without the right kind of support causes barriers to education. Classrooms are social environments where individuals with ASD may find different degrees of difficulties in communicating, interacting or socialising. A salient feature of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 is that the government will fund educational institutions as well as the government recognised institutions to provide inclusive education to the children with reasonable accommodation to disabled. However, it must be kept in mind that the support needed for the student with ASD to overcome the barrier to education should be specific to the needs of the individual. Inclusive education for individuals with ASD should begin with the first step of understanding this invisible disability.

Quality education ushers in changes in the life of any child. For a disabled child quality education helps in every sphere of life, from knowing and understanding their rights as a citizen, getting jobs, health and other services. For education to play this role as ‘an enabling right’, it must be of high quality, available equitably, built to tackle discrimination and allow each child to flourish according to their own talents and interests.<sup>14</sup>

In recent times, the trend in education is toward inclusion of children with disabilities, a type of inclusion that supports various learning styles and diverse instructional practices.<sup>15</sup> Under the aegis of inclusive education, the multi-pronged strategies that a teacher can employ include planning techniques, organising learning environments, mastering instructional delivery that reaches students of different abilities, and evaluating the usefulness of teaching strategies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Singal, N., *Inclusive Education in India: International Concept, National Interpretation*, 53(3) INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DISABILITY, DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION, 351-369 (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Yell M. L. & Katsiyannis A., *Critical Issues and Trends in the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Introduction to the Special Issue*, 18(3) FOCUS ON AUTISM & OTHER DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, 1088-3576 (2003).

<sup>16</sup> SCOTT J., CLARK C. & BRADY M., *STUDENTS WITH AUTISM: CHARACTERISTICS AND INSTRUCTION PROGRAMMING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS* (2000).

### 3. **Identifying and understanding the unique needs of students with ASD:**

ASD happens when the brain develops differently. As an autistic person is born with an impaired brain h/she has a lot of trouble in interpreting the sensory input perceived by the brain. So the autistic person often faces difficulty in talking, listening, understanding, playing and eventually learning. ASD is a lifelong developmental disability.

The rise in the number of children with ASD and the kinds of difficulties that they face raises quite a few questions and concerns on how to create a level-playing platform that ensures appropriate education in the least restraining environment to children on the spectrum. This can be achieved only if the nature of impairment and its implications are kept in mind during the education process.

### 4. **Triad of Impairment in persons with ASD**

There were three areas of impairment, forming a cluster of features that provide an indicative criteria for identifying of autism.<sup>17</sup> The external manifestation of the triad of impairment in individuals with ASD is in their restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. Findings suggest that repetitive behaviors emanate from unusual wiring patterns in the brain. ASD manifests itself in a myriad of ways in different individuals and this fact must be kept in mind while teaching them. All autistic students will have difficulties in the three areas with differential overlapping. This is the reason why ASD is called a ‘spectrum disorder.’

This cluster referred to as the triad of impairments which are as follows.

- A. **Impairment of Social Interaction:** The implications of this impairment is that the individual may show impaired, deviant and extremely delayed social development, especially interpersonal development. There may be difficulties in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors, viz., facial expressions, gaze, body postures, eye-to-eye, etc.

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<sup>17</sup> Wing L. & Gould J., *Severe Impairments of Social Interaction and Associated Abnormalities in Children Epidemiology and Classification*, 9 JOURNAL OF AUTISM AND CHILDHOOD SCHIZOPHRENIA 11-29 (1979).

- B. Impairment of Social Communication:** The individual with autism will have impaired and nonstandard language skills and communication lingo, both verbal and non-verbal.
- C. Impairment of Behaviour & Social Understanding:** Individuals will possess rigidity of thought & behavior and poor social imagination, ranging from inability to play imaginatively with toys to not being able to mix freely with other children, especially when such individuals are in childhood days. They may be involved in repetitive stereotyped activities. Individuals will also have difficulties in understanding abstract concepts such as feelings and emotions.

### **5. Attitudinal and social support for students with ASD**

Students with autism require attitudinal and social support to be integrated into mainstream education for the maximum realisation of their human resource potential. Given that the disorder is complex and in a way incurable, it is understandable that the educational needs of persons with autism remain largely unattended.

In case of other disabilities, often a universal strategy works fine for many students. For example, if there are a few students who have locomotor impairment and need to use the wheelchair, then a ramp in the school provides accessibility to classrooms. If there are some visually impaired students, reference material in Braille along with appropriate training would go a long way in inclusion. These support systems would benefit a number of students with the same disability. The 10 (ten) examples that were cited earlier elucidate that the barriers to quality education are varied among students with ASD. So, the issue becomes complex because the teachers must first understand and acknowledge the ‘culture of autism’ first and then devise strategies to overcome the barrier.

For the students in the examples, their support systems could be Visual schedules, Structured classrooms, individual work stations, Social stories, IEPs, Picture Exchange

Communication System, providing ‘shadows’ and ‘buddies’. But most of the support system(s) must be evaluated for their success and improved/replaced on a regular basis. The type of support for students will change over time and situation, in addition to being individualised. The fact that ASD is an invisible disability further makes inclusion quite difficult. The teachers have to have a clear idea of challenging behaviours due to ASD and other behaviour due to some other cause.

The teachers are the ones entrusted with the task of making situation work in complex situations and the success of inclusion is dependent on the class teacher accepting diversity, different learning styles and maintaining a flexible system. In the evaluation of UNESCO funded project ‘Special needs in the classroom’ the researchers concluded that *“relatively small changes in schooling, supported by better teacher preparation, can facilitate the education of many children with disabilities and make better arrangements for many others who experience difficulties in learning.”*<sup>18</sup>

Although knowing the general characteristics of ASD is helpful, teaching strategies for students with ASD still need to be individualised. It is imperative for teachers to appreciate the expectations of their students. Children with ASD often have visual-spatial strengths. Knowing this, teachers can modify their instructional strategies.<sup>19</sup> Attitudinal and social supports are needed by all students with ASD to remove the barriers for quality education.

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<sup>18</sup> Ainscow M., Jangira N. K., & Ahuja A., *Education: Responding to Special Needs Through Teacher Development*, in *DISABLED CHILDREN AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES* 131-146 (P. Zinkin & H. M. Conachie eds., 1995).

<sup>19</sup> GRANDIN TEMPLE, *THINKING IN PICTURES, EXPANDED EDITION: MY LIFE WITH AUTISM* (2006).

## 6. Conclusion

Many students with ASD disabilities are now inducted in general education classes and are spending the majority of their school day in schools promoting the cause of inclusive education. It is widely recognised that students with ASD require attitudinal and social support to be truly integrated into a general education classroom. Parents are an untapped resource when it comes to their children's educational, social, mental and intellectual development. Past research shows that parental involvement is linked to greater developmental outcomes in children who are diagnosed with ASD. As there is diversity among students with ASD, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' strategy. Different students with ASD will require different support in the classrooms. Teachers must be aware of this fact.

It is important to remember that it is the behavior which causes trouble, and certainly not the student. It is important to make this distinction even though in some cases a student may seem to continually try the teacher's patience. Since ASD is a disability, rather a medical condition that varies both in degree and in form from student to student, a comprehensive program that best meets the needs of such students with autism should be put in place.

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