

Children with Disabilities in Regular Schools

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Neha, a precocious 7-year-old, is a student of class II at one of Bhopal's leading schools. A darling of her teachers, she is a leader among her peers. Doing well academically herself, Neha loves to help her classmates with their assignments too. So full of life is she that it is easy to forget that she is blind, and her textbooks are punched (Braille), not printed.

Neha had no formal education until the age of four. Her parents had done their best to home-school her since most schools around their home were not equipped to educate students with disabilities. They were also concerned about their child – how she would cope in a regular (mainstream) school and because she would be much older than most of her classmates, if she would be isolated, or worse, ostracised. It was then that her parents first learnt about and brought Neha to *Arushi*, a non-profit organisation working with children and adults with physical and intellectual disabilities.

As part of their foundational philosophy, *Arushi* seeks to take children and people with disabilities out of environments that cater to 'special needs' and empowers them with the life skills that enable them to assimilate into 'mainstream' society.

Why and when special schools are needed

While children with disabilities between the age of 2-6 years are eligible for regular schools, the decision to send them to one is subjective and based on the nature and severity of a child's disability. Children of this age group with a mild or moderate disability have a better chance of assimilating well into regular schools.

Children who have visual or hearing-related disabilities can go to regular school at any age since their disabilities are purely physical and not intellectual in nature. Children with Down syndrome, autism and other intellectual disabilities, whose development milestones are delayed can also attend regular schools but require support and training for school readiness before they can do so.

When children with disabilities study in a mainstream school, the interactions between them and the rest can create disability champions and advocates among non-disabled children. Children without disabilities develop an early awareness of the needs and abilities of children with disabilities which goes a long way not only in creating a rightful place for people with disabilities in society but also in building an empathetic, just and equitable society.

The most critical part of the care of a child with a disability is early intervention. Parents and teachers need to look out for developmental delays in the early years. If any development milestone is missed or delayed, first a paediatrician should be consulted and, on their advice, the child may be referred to an organisation and school which cater to their needs. At such a place, counsellors and psychologists employ methods such as diagnostic tests to understand the difficulty the child may be facing and create a plan for the interventions required. Caregivers who are overprotective or live in denial of the fact that their child has a disability stall the process of the child getting suitable treatment and support to gain independence and control over their life.

School readiness programme

Special educators at *Arushi* focused on teaching Braille to Neha, while occupational therapists helped her with other skills of daily life, such as mobility. They started with oral and sensory exercises to enable her to read Braille. Along with this, they assessed her calibre and her readiness for mainstream education. It took them nearly six months to determine that Neha could not only successfully integrate into a regular school but would also thrive there.

Koshish, at *Arushi*, is a school-readiness programme for children with disabilities under the age of five who are not enrolled in regular schools. Here, children with cerebral palsy, learning difficulties and other physical disabilities and developmental

delays are equipped with basic school readiness skills, so they can be admitted into regular schools at the earliest. After an assessment to determine the nature and cause of their disability, a detailed plan for their therapy is prepared. Children with intellectual disabilities receive occupational therapy to improve coordination, eye contact, attention spans, sitting for extended periods and focusing on tasks at hand so that they can adjust in a regular classroom.

Children who have speech impairment receive speech therapy. Instructors determine if the child has a hearing impairment too. If so, they determine the need and effectiveness of a hearing aid. If they discover that the child can hear without aids but is still not speaking, speech therapists use alternate means to assist these children. These therapies are long-term and continue much after a child integrates into a regular school.

Using the play-way method, special educators acquaint the children with auditory, visual and tactile stimuli. Guided by factors such as the readiness of a child to learn and their emotional and physical abilities, educators employ multiple strategies to equip children with the skills and tools they require to thrive in a world beyond the narrow confines of their 'special' spaces and to grow up to live and work independently.

While Braille, sensory and mobility exercises formed the focus of Neha's training, *Arushi's* strategy and therapies for each child are tailored to fit their needs. For instance, children with Down syndrome experience not just physical limitations, but also developmental and social challenges and may often struggle with speaking clearly. Their regimen includes speech therapy, building eye contact and honing social skills in tandem with gaining academic knowledge. Their socialisation skills are another developmental area that instructors in *Koshish* focus on. Without this training, these children cannot adjust well in a mixed classroom.

Caregiver counselling

Neha's parents were counselled about their apprehensions about sending her to a regular school. Counsellors explained to them that schools for the visually impaired, while well-meaning and supportive, would limit Neha's learning and experiences. The company and behavioural influence of non-disabled children would be a catalyst in Neha's growth. That it is the right of the child to have all the opportunities non-disabled

children enjoy, to reach their potential. *Arushi* also extends parental counselling to ensure that the children experience the same empowerment at home as at school.

School admission and after

Alongside her skill training in Braille and occupational therapy, Neha was equipped with preschool curricular learning, so she was up to speed with her peers in this aspect too. All the hard work done by Neha, her parents and her teachers culminated in Neha enrolling in a government school in 2021, directly into class I, appropriate for the now six-year-old.

Neha continues to visit *Arushi* after school, where she receives additional support in academics that she needs and help with other aspects of school life and her extra-curricular development. Theatre, music, dance, yoga and craft play an important role in the development of children with disabilities and *Arushi* employs all these means to provide an environment for holistic development. Theatre plays a critical role in personality development. Paper cutting, folding and pasting improve hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills, especially for children on the autism spectrum.

Work with educators

An important role in this entire journey of a child with a disability to study and grow alongside their peers without disabilities is played by the teachers in schools and much of the success of these children in the regular school system depends on them. It is, therefore, crucial that these teachers understand the need for children with disabilities to study in regular schools and support this in every way that they can. Also, the main reason cited by mainstream schools that deny admission to students with disabilities is the lack of trained staff. To overcome this, *Arushi* organises trainings and awareness programmes for school teachers and administrators that focus on dispelling myths and misconceptions about disabilities and emphasise the importance of having children with disabilities study in mainstream schools.

They conduct orientation workshops in which teachers share their classroom experiences with experts who help them understand the needs of children with disabilities. The teachers are acquainted with updated teaching methods, pedagogy and strategies that they can employ in classrooms where there are children with

disabilities. The educators also learn ways of identifying and assessing learning and other difficulties children may be experiencing. Over the years, over three lakh government school teachers in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have attended these orientations and trainings.

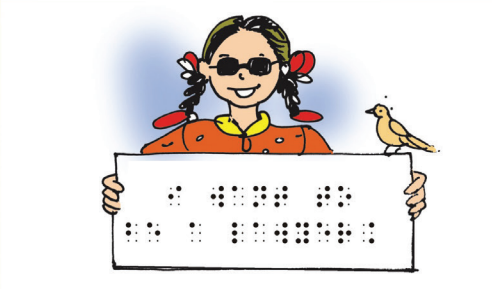
To support their work in schools, *Arushi* provides teachers with teaching aids, such as charts of alphabets in *Devnagri* and English along with the corresponding symbols in Braille and Sign Language. It has also created video tutorials on teaching Braille and mathematics to children with visual challenges and on teaching Sign Language to

those with hearing difficulties.

General tips for teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms

- Initiate a buddy system and seat them with other students who are willing and able to assist them
- Encourage peers to volunteer as scribes, note-takers and readers
- Allow extended time in texts, exams and assignments
- Repeat instructions to ascertain instructions and questions have been understood well

Braille An Introduction



Do you know what is written here?
It is: I want to be a lawyer.

Like devnaagri and Gurumukhi etc. Braille is also a script. Braille script is used by Blind persons to read and write. Braille was invented by Louis Braille in 1829. Braille script is based on six dots. These six dots are referred as the Braille cell. Each cell comprises of one Braille character. To write Braille script Blind person uses Stylus and Braille slate. Braille slate consist essentially of two metal or plastic plates hinged together to permit a sheet of paper to be inserted between the two plates. While writing on a Braille sheet (drawing sheet) it is to be written from right to left and then reverse the normal numbering of the Braille cell. Blind person reads these raised (embossed) dots with the help of their finger tip.

① ④

② ⑤

③ ⑥

Braille cell

Total 63 combinations are possible using these 6 dots.
Some combinations given below:

| Braille Chart | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| a | b | c | d | e | f | g | h | i | j |
| ⠁ | ⠃ | ⠉ | ⠙ | ⠑ | ⠋ | ⠗ | ⠎ | ⠊ | ⠚ |
| k | l | m | n | o | p | q | r | s | t |
| ⠅ | ⠇ | ⠓ | ⠟ | ⠕ | ⠖ | ⠞ | ⠘ | ⠡ | ⠞ |
| u | v | w | x | y | z | | | | |
| ⠥ | ⠦ | ⠷ | ⠭ | ⠵ | ⠴ | | | | |
| A Number sign (⠼) is used before the alphabets 'a' to 'j' to convert them to numbers. | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 0 |
| ⠼⠁ | ⠼⠃ | ⠼⠉ | ⠼⠙ | ⠼⠑ | ⠼⠋ | ⠼⠗ | ⠼⠎ | ⠼⠊ | ⠼⠚ |

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Figure 1. Understanding Braille, a teaching aid

When a child with a visual disability is in the classroom:

- Maximise teaching through touch (tactile)
- Use 3D models instead of pictures where possible
- Describe pictures if models are not available
- Use voice instructions and cues instead of gestures or expressions
- Seat students with visual disabilities in the front of the class

When a child with hearing difficulty is in the classroom:

- Maximise teaching through visual aids
- Provide written copies and visual aids for any instructions given
- Turn on captions in any video used in the classroom
- Seat them in the front of the class so that they can lip-read with ease

मेरी कक्षा में कुछ विकलांग बच्चे हैं



दृष्टिहीन बच्चे के लिए..... नाम लेकर पुकारें।
'ए' या 'तुम' कहने से वह बौखला जाते हैं।
उन्हें स्कूल के गेट से लेकर सभी रास्तों से परिचित करा दें।
कक्षा से शौचालय तक-
प्रिंसिपल के कमरे तक-
और खेल के मैदान तक।

दूसरा बच्चा सुन नहीं सकता और शायद बोलता भी न हो। उससे जब बात करें, या पढ़ायें, ताकि वह आपके हाँठ पढ़ सके और इशारे समझ सके।



एक तीसरा बच्चा भी है जिसके अंग उसके बस में नहीं लेकिन दिमाग उसके काबू में है। वह वहीं व्हील चेयर पर बैठा है। उस पर हँसे नहीं बल्कि हर जगह सीढ़ियों के स्थान पर चढ़ाई-उतराई के लिए रैंप बनवायें।

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Figure 2. Some simple tips for teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms

In summary

Arushi has supported over 500 children in integrating into mainstream education. Behind each of these success stories is a school teacher who was willing to go the extra mile to help every child in their classroom succeed. Aware of the special measures required, these educators

supported the student's journey in ways that may be different from their usual work with children. Each such teacher is a catalyst in creating a space for children with disabilities to lead enriched lives in regular schools and consequently find their rightful place in society.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



Pallavee Dutta is a content writer based in Bhopal. A software techie by training, she currently writes at the intersection of tech and storytelling. Pallavee volunteers at *Arushi* and hopes to be one of the voices that tell their incredible stories. She may be contacted at pallaveedutta@gmail.com

For instance, even if a child has grade-appropriate competencies related to language and mathematics, poor socio-emotional conditioning is reflected through their faculties of expression. These include the lack of an ability to express oneself freely, being self-aware, being capable of teamwork, having a sensitive attitude towards the hardships of peers and adjusting one's behaviour while being aware of the likes and dislikes of the people around. Unfortunately, these aspects are not accorded the attention that they deserve.

Shubham Raturi, The Elephant in the Room | SEL Deficient Teaching, p 50