**Empowering Persons with Intellectual Impairment**

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A few days back, I was invited by the Department of Social Welfare, Punjab to participate in a consultative meeting on “Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2021.” It was heartening to listen to many strong voices–from leaders and representatives of persons with disabilities. In fact, the whole journey towards this act started with a petition filed by Ms Sana Khursheed versus Govt of Punjab. Ms Khursheed, being a physically impaired person and a lawyer, filed a case voicing her right to accessibility. Lahore High Court not only acknowledged her rights but also called for proper legislation to safeguard the rights of persons with special needs.

A team of seasoned lawyers and activists have chalked down a good document under the patronage of Minister (Social Welfare) Syed Yawar Abbas Bukhari. During the consultative meeting, a few amendments and improvements were suggested by stakeholders, especially regarding the right to employment, right to personal mobility, assessment and issuance of disability certificate. I will shed light on these suggestions in another article. Right now, I want to focus on one point that is completely leaving out persons with intellectual impairment when discussing the right to quality and inclusive education and the right to employment. Persons with neurodiversity and intellectual disabilities are often ignored or given less importance when it comes to developing policies, legislation and rules of business.

The theme for International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021 “Not all Disabilities are Visible” emphasises the need to raise awareness about different types and categories of disabilities. Generally, people have a relatively fair idea of the visible special needs such as physical disabilities, but neurodevelopmental, emotional and intellectual impairments are not that easily understood.

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In the past two decades, I have witnessed people failing to understand why a seemingly handsome young man is enrolled in a special education institute only because intellectual impairment cannot be seen. Similarly, we often get asked how many people graduate or complete their training in an academic year without understanding that the functioning level, learning profile and learning speed of persons with intellectual impairment cannot be compared to typically growing students. The same confusion continues to penetrate the policy development process, especially if experts from relevant fields are not involved in the due course.

We need to know that limitations in intellectual abilities affect a person’s capacity to grasp different concepts. Children with intellectual impairment not only take longer to learn new concepts, but their learning ceiling is also lower than a typically growing child. They cannot complete grade level education in one academic year. Every child has different strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, their maximum potential for academic achievement is also different. I have seen children showing attainment of academic skills ranging from grade one to grade six or seven. In our country, there is no facility available for doing matriculation with a modified syllabus. Thus, most children with intellectual impairment fail to achieve any formal academic qualification.

Children with intellectual impairment require special attention to reach their maximum potential. Special and inclusive education services can help a great deal in this regard. I strongly believe that, whenever possible, children with intellectual impairment should get access to quality inclusive education. Interaction with typically growing children has a positive impact on the development of their communication, motor and social skills. But unluckily, these children are given the least consideration when it comes to planning and implementing strategies for inclusive education.

As I shared above, after a certain level, academic concepts start becoming increasingly complex for children with intellectual impairment. Some children might benefit from curriculum modification to continue their studies, but such specialised services are quite limited in our country. Access to quality vocational training programs can play a vital role in making them financially self-dependent.

Although public technical training institutes, for example, Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority, have a quota fixed for persons with disabilities, their entry requirements (having minimum matric certificate, fixed time for completion of training and unavailability of trained staff for imparting training to trainees with special needs) prevent adolescents with intellectual impairment from benefitting. At present, most students with intellectual impairment are receiving vocational training from private or nonprofit organisations.

Based on my experience, I can confidently say that they might take longer to master a specific skill and even end up achieving mastery to a specific level. But with proper support, they can be accommodated in an assembly line model. For example, in a textile unit, an adult with intellectual impairment can easily be employed on packing, buttoning or straight-line sewing stations. Someone with good communication skills can also be hired for simple front desk-related jobs. I can give an example of our two former students, who have been hired by Shaukat Khanum Cancer hospital as “Patient Guides.” A full shift has been split into two and each performs his duty for half working hours. With the commitment of the employer and the support of a job coach, those two adults with intellectual impairment are settled in their jobs.

For the last two decades, I have been a part of the struggle to raise awareness on the rights and special abilities of persons with neurodiversity. Despite all hard work and efforts, finding respectable employment for them remains a constant struggle. Our policymakers and think tanks leave this segment out while planning for persons with special needs. There are many different models of training and employment for them, for example, sheltered employment, transitional training and supported employment. If decision-makers are committed, the best indigenous models can be developed and replicated.

In National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2002 and Plan of Action 2006, it was clearly mentioned that the government should increase opportunities for vocational training for persons with special needs. But unluckily, when it comes to intellectual impairment, we lack commitment, acceptance and even representation at both policy and implementation levels. Serious actions need to be taken to ensure this segment also gets its due rights.

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