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Ensuring Equity for Children with Disabilities: A Human Rights Based Perspective in Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

Equity and human rights are foundational principles for building inclusive societies. They are especially important in ensuring that children with disabilities, often referred to as special children, receive equal opportunities to participate in education, healthcare, recreation, and community life. Although international conventions and national policies have strengthened the legal protection of children with disabilities, many continue to experience discrimination, exclusion, and unequal access to essential services. Contemporary society increasingly recognizes that equality alone is insufficient, because children have diverse needs that require individualized support. This paper examines the concepts of equity and human rights, discusses the international legal frameworks that protect special children, identifies barriers to inclusion, and highlights the importance of inclusive education, family support, community participation, and government responsibility. It further explores practical strategies for promoting equitable opportunities and protecting the dignity and rights of children with disabilities. Ensuring equity requires collaboration among governments, educators, healthcare professionals, families, and society to remove barriers and create environments in which every child can achieve their full potential.

Keywords: *Equity, human rights, inclusion, children with disabilities, special education, inclusive education*

I. INTRODUCTION

Human rights are universal and belong to every individual regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, or disability. These rights include access to education, healthcare, protection, dignity, participation, and equal opportunities for personal development. Children with disabilities, commonly referred to as special children, represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society, because they frequently encounter barriers that limit their participation in education and community life. Although many countries have adopted inclusive policies,

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discrimination and inequality continue to affect millions of children worldwide (United Nations, 1989).

Equity differs from equality. Equality provides everyone with the same opportunities, whereas equity recognizes that individuals have different needs and therefore require different levels of support to achieve comparable outcomes (UNESCO, 2020). For example, providing the same classroom instruction to every student may appear equal, but a child with a hearing impairment may require sign language interpretation or assistive listening devices to access learning effectively. Similarly, a child with autism may require structured routines, visual supports, or individualized instruction to succeed academically. Equity therefore ensures fairness by allocating resources according to individual needs rather than treating everyone identically.

The movement toward inclusive education has transformed educational systems by recognizing diversity as a strength rather than a limitation. Inclusive schools encourage participation, respect, collaboration, and acceptance among all learners. Such environments benefit not only children with disabilities but also promote empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility among typically developing students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Consequently, ensuring equity and protecting the human rights of special children have become central objectives of sustainable development and educational reform across the world.

II. EQUITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights rest on the principles of dignity, equality, justice, participation, and non-discrimination. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes education as a basic human right that should be available to every individual without discrimination (United Nations, 1948). Building on this principle, the Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that every child has the right to education, healthcare, protection, and opportunities for development (United Nations, 1989). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further establishes that children with disabilities have the right to inclusive education, accessibility, and full participation in society (United Nations, 2006).

The concept of equity complements these human rights by recognizing that fairness requires addressing differences in individual circumstances. Rather than providing identical services, equitable systems remove barriers and offer accommodations that enable every child to participate fully (UNESCO, 2020). This perspective reflects the social model of disability, which holds that disability results not only from an individual's impairment but also from environmental and societal barriers. Inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, inflexible

educational practices, and inadequate support services often restrict participation more than the impairment itself (World Health Organization, 2022).

Promoting equity therefore involves changing systems rather than expecting children to adapt to environments that exclude them. Governments, schools, healthcare providers, and communities all share responsibility for creating accessible and inclusive environments.

III. CHALLENGES FACED BY SPECIAL CHILDREN

Despite increasing awareness of disability rights, many children continue to experience educational, social, economic, and healthcare-related barriers. Educational exclusion remains one of the most significant challenges. Many schools lack the trained special educators, accessible classrooms, individualized instructional materials, and assistive technologies necessary for inclusive learning (Ainscow, 2020). Teachers may also have limited preparation in differentiated instruction, making it difficult to address diverse learning needs effectively.

Social discrimination further limits participation. Negative stereotypes, prejudice, and misconceptions often result in bullying, isolation, and low expectations, which in turn reduce children's confidence, emotional well-being, and academic motivation (UNICEF, 2021). When society focuses primarily on disability rather than ability, children may be denied opportunities to demonstrate their talents and contribute meaningfully.

Healthcare inequalities represent another major concern. Early diagnosis, intervention, rehabilitation, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and psychological support significantly improve developmental outcomes. However, access to these services remains unequal, particularly in low-income and rural communities (World Health Organization, 2022).

Economic challenges also affect families of children with disabilities. Parents often face increased expenses related to healthcare, therapy, transportation, and specialized educational resources. Some caregivers reduce their working hours or leave employment altogether to care for their children, creating additional financial pressures.

The rapid growth of digital education has introduced new opportunities but also new inequalities. Digital learning platforms that lack accessibility features exclude children with visual, hearing, intellectual, or motor disabilities. Ensuring digital accessibility has therefore become an essential component of educational equity (UNESCO, 2020).

IV. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Inclusive education is one of the most effective strategies for promoting equity and protecting the rights of special children. It involves educating all learners together in regular classrooms

while providing individualized support to accommodate diverse abilities and learning styles (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Research demonstrates that inclusive education benefits both children with disabilities and their peers. Students with disabilities develop stronger academic, communication, and social skills through interaction with classmates, while students without disabilities gain empathy, cooperation, respect for diversity, and collaborative problem-solving skills (Ainscow, 2020). Successful inclusion requires more than physical placement in mainstream classrooms. Teachers should employ differentiated instruction, flexible teaching methods, cooperative learning, and varied assessment strategies to meet diverse learner needs (Tomlinson, 2017). The Universal Design for Learning framework encourages educators to present information through multiple formats, provide different methods of engagement, and allow learners various ways to demonstrate understanding.

Assistive technologies further enhance inclusion by increasing independence and participation. Examples include screen-reading software, Braille displays, speech-to-text programs, hearing aids, communication boards, adaptive keyboards, and augmentative communication devices. These technologies enable many students to participate effectively in academic and social activities.

Teacher professional development remains essential for successful implementation. Continuous training strengthens educators' knowledge of disability awareness, classroom adaptations, inclusive pedagogy, and collaboration with families and specialists.

V. ROLE OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Families are the primary advocates for special children and play a crucial role in supporting development and protecting rights. Parents understand their children's strengths, preferences, challenges, and aspirations better than anyone else. Their active involvement improves educational planning and ensures continuity between home and school (UNICEF, 2021). Effective collaboration between teachers and parents promotes individualized educational planning and the early identification of learning needs, and regular communication allows educators and families to evaluate progress and modify interventions when necessary.

Communities contribute to inclusion by promoting awareness and reducing stigma. Community organizations, disability advocacy groups, religious institutions, and recreational programs can create opportunities for social participation and meaningful engagement. Public awareness campaigns encourage acceptance by emphasizing the abilities and contributions of individuals with disabilities rather than focusing solely on limitations.

Media also influence public attitudes. Positive and realistic portrayals of children with disabilities encourage inclusion, reduce stereotypes, and foster respect for diversity. Inclusive representation helps normalize disability as a natural aspect of human diversity.

VI. GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Governments have the primary responsibility for protecting human rights through legislation, policy development, and public investment. Disability legislation should prohibit discrimination and guarantee equal access to education, healthcare, employment, transportation, and public services (United Nations, 2006).

Inclusive education requires adequate financial investment. Governments should provide accessible school buildings, trained teachers, assistive technologies, transportation, specialized support services, and learning materials adapted to diverse needs (UNESCO, 2020).

Healthcare systems should strengthen early intervention services, rehabilitation programs, mental health support, and family counselling. Financial assistance and social protection programs also reduce the economic burden experienced by many families raising children with disabilities. Reliable national data on disability prevalence, educational participation, healthcare access, and employment outcomes support evidence-based policymaking, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation enable governments to identify service gaps and improve program effectiveness.

VII. STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING EQUITY

Several practical strategies can strengthen equity and improve outcomes for special children. Educational institutions should adopt Universal Design for Learning principles and differentiated instruction to accommodate learner diversity from the outset, rather than relying solely on individual accommodations (Tomlinson, 2017). Continuous teacher professional development should include disability awareness, inclusive instructional methods, classroom management, assistive technologies, and collaborative practice.

Governments should increase funding for inclusive education, rehabilitation services, and accessible infrastructure, while strengthening policy implementation and accountability mechanisms. Interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, healthcare providers, and families ensures comprehensive support that addresses educational, emotional, and developmental needs.

Public awareness campaigns should challenge myths and misconceptions surrounding disability. Promoting positive attitudes encourages acceptance and reduces discrimination

across schools, workplaces, and communities. Finally, children with disabilities should participate actively in decisions affecting their education and well-being. Respecting children's voices reflects the principles of dignity, autonomy, and participation set out in international human rights frameworks (United Nations, 1989).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ensuring equity and protecting the human rights of special children are essential responsibilities of contemporary societies. Although international conventions and national legislation have established strong legal foundations for inclusion, genuine equity requires continuous commitment from governments, educators, healthcare professionals, families, communities, and civil society. Equality alone cannot address the diverse needs of children with disabilities; equitable approaches recognize individual differences and provide the appropriate support that enables meaningful participation.

Inclusive education represents one of the most effective pathways toward social justice, because it promotes respect, participation, academic achievement, and equal opportunity for all learners. Accessible environments, assistive technologies, trained professionals, supportive families, and informed communities together create conditions in which every child can reach their full potential.

Ultimately, protecting the rights of special children benefits society as a whole by fostering diversity, compassion, innovation, and social cohesion. Continued investment in inclusive policies, accessible services, and disability awareness will help build communities in which every child is valued, respected, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to society.

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