

WHEN
~~DIS~~ABILITIES
TAKE **FLIGHT**



The disability
is not the problem.
The accessibility
is the problem.

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PREFACE

Consortium for
Inclusive Education
(CIE) has put together
inspirational success
stories of CwDs
and the challenges
faced by them in the
process.


Education of children with disabilities (CwDs) in India has moved from segregation to special schools to integrated schools and now to Inclusion of CwDs into mainstream schools. Although there are noteworthy efforts being made by many schools, the number of children with disabilities enrolled into schools is insignificant.

Consortium for Inclusive Education (CIE) has put together inspirational success stories of CwDs and the challenges faced by them in the process. In this collection of 'success stories' each child and the parent has attributed the child's success to the opportunity of being included into a mainstream school.

Going through these stories you will feel the pain parents undergo after they realize that their child will not be able to have a "normal" life. You will feel the anguish experienced by the child through their growing years, you will see perplexed situations school managements face when approached for admission of a child with disability, and you will see teachers struggle as they are not trained to make classroom accommodations to help a child with disability. However, these stories will also spark inspiration and faith in the heights that CwDs can achieve through perseverance of a resilient support system.

CIE is committed to the cause of Inclusive Education. Our purpose to publish this book is to inspire CwDs, their parents, teachers, schools, and policy makers to be agents of change.

Dr Ruchi Mehta
Founding Trustee



Most people see what is,
and never see what *can be*.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

meet

ANIRRUDHA PASWAN

Age 19 years

Child with Physical Disability

12th (Commerce) Standard;
Businessman; Aadarsh Hindi
Vidyalaya

Supported by: Disha school and
Autism center

Aniruddha came by his disability through a horrific accident when he was a 1-year-old toddler. Aniruddha burnt his leg when he fell off his make-shift bed at night. The family lived in a small village in Gujarat, and there was no hospital near-by or even the means to get to one.

Aniruddha finally received treatment when his parents could get him to the local medical centre, which was more than 10 kms away. But it was too little, too late.



Doctors at Aniruddha's village had no knowledge of how to properly treat the burn. They bandaged it up, letting the wound fester and get infected- leaving them no choice but to amputate his foot.

Aniruddha has made sure that his disability does not stop him from doing anything he wants. He pushed himself to the very limit, physically. He chose a mainstream school almost an hour away from his home simply so that he could cycle to and from there every day as a part of his daily exercise routine.

Youngest of four children, Aniruddha followed in his brothers' footsteps by joining a mainstream school from the very beginning of his formal education. He faced difficulties initially. Because he was different and could not always participate in activities like his peers, Aniruddha had problems socialising at school. However, things changed once he moved to Vadodara. While they had very little access to resources in the village, moving to the city enabled Aniruddha to get not only necessary treatment but also the support he needed.

"I joined the Disha centre in 2010, and since then, it has become like my second home," Aniruddha said. He was associated with Disha for over six years, until 9th standard. The institute provided him with not only physiotherapy but also intervention therapies like cognitive stimulation, expressive therapies and counselling.

"I got the chance to participate in so many different activities, such as art and craft, dancing, music, and singing. This really taught me to be open to new experiences and opportunities," Aniruddha added.

The added support helped Aniruddha socialise and make friends. He became more outgoing at school, taking part in a number of inter-school and inter-state painting and singing

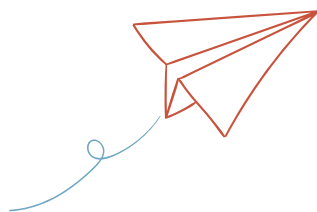
competitions, for which he showed considerable talent. Despite his amputation, Aniruddha became actively involved in sports, playing cricket and football with his friends. In what would have been an unimaginable feat before, Aniruddha even travelled on a two-day trip to participate in a singing festival with his school group, for which he received an award!

Currently, Aniruddha is also operating his own small business - a shop of mobile accessories that he set up with his friend. In academics too, Aniruddha has been tenacious and hard-working. He is set to clear his last subject (Accounting) in a couple of months to gain his Higher Secondary Certificate, Commerce and aims to pursue a Bachelor in Commerce thereafter. We wish Aniruddha all the best for his exams and all the success in his business venture!

Today, I can walk and run easily and even wear shoes normally – my leg has almost become a non-issue. Over time, I have learnt to not let my disability define me or stop me from achieving my goals.



meet
AARUSH RAWAT



Age 13 years

Child with Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

Class 8, Dr Thakorebhai V Patel Public School, Vadodara

Supported by: Consortium for Inclusive Education

Since early childhood, Aarush’s teachers and principals underestimated him and outright told his parents that he didn’t belong in a regular school. Nevertheless, the resilient child is a 6th Standard student at a mainstream school today.

After multiple trips to psychologists, Aarush was diagnosed with high-functioning Autism and ADHD. He has acute social difficulties and learning differences. This made school a harrowing experience for him.



In play-school, Aarush’s teachers tied him to his chair as a discipline measure because of his hyperactivity. His parents only found out about it when they happened to be visiting the school and heard their son crying out from a nearby classroom. Outraged, they immediately transferred Aarush to another school, but the change didn’t help.

Aarush’s teachers were ill prepared to tutor and guide him in a way that helped him open up and develop socially and intellectually. At a loss about how to connect with him, they simply neglected him and segregated him from his peers.

It’s no surprise that Aarush hated school. He hated that he often had to sit apart from his classmates. He hated not being included in activities. And he hated that he was punished repeatedly. School became a lonesome place for Aarush.

It wasn’t until his parents engaged a shadow teacher at their own expense, did they realise that Aarush’s behavioural issues stemmed from other kids bullying, instigating and manipulating him. Teachers had already labelled him a ‘problem child’ and there seemed to be no getting around it.

It was heartbreaking for Aarush’s parents. His mother says that she saw him backsliding before her eyes: he had lost his confidence as he was being bullied constantly. Finally, she had no choice but withdraw Aarush from that school.

Aarush spent a year being homeschooled and working extensively with his therapist. He can now make eye contact and answer questions with verbal prompts. It took Aarush time to catch-up with his peers, but his mother is proud of how far he has come. She beams with pleasure as she tells us that Aarush is becoming more independent. He loves and boasts of an impressive talent in drawing and swimming.

The family’s next goal was taking another go at inclusive education. This time around, it was a nightmare getting schools to even agree to admit him. Most schools thought he belonged in a special school, saying their teachers did didn’t have the expertise and capacity to accommodate his needs.

Finally, a school agreed to admit Aarush in 6th Standard. Despite no special educators, the school has made every effort to include Aarush and devote extra attention to his needs. He learns with his peers and is tested differently. Aarush’s mother has bridged the gap by helping his teachers better understand his condition and his visual learning approach.

Aarush’s story is inspiring: it shows that with a lot of persistence and a little support from the family and community, any child can overcome his or her challenges and achieve personal success.



meet

ARMAAN ZAHEERABBAS BHATKAR



Age 12 years

Child with Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Class 6
Baroda High School, Vadodara

Supported by: Seher, Ek Udaan

“Would he ever live a normal life?”

Armaan’s parents worried when their premature baby was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. At 5 years, Armaan had only just started speaking and could barely walk. The disorder meant that he had delayed mental and physical development.



Armaan’s parents doubted whether he would ever attend and adapt to a mainstream school. But undeterred by their worries, and inspired by the success of other differently-abled children in an inclusive educational setting, they resolved to provide him a normal education.

Teachers were skeptical at first - Armaan’s developmental delay made them hesitant to believe that he could learn and progress with his peers. Finally, they agreed to admit him - on one condition. The parents were responsible for hiring a helper who would stay with Armaan at all times and attend to his basic needs like taking him to his classes, the toilet, and helping him with communicating. The process was painful and long; many helpers left because of the challenges involved in caring for a Cerebral Palsy child but they finally found a good fit.

The change in Armaan was remarkable. For the first time in life, he started making friends. He had never been able to interact and play with other kids in his society. But an inclusive school setting coaxed Armaan from his cocoon and he flourished into a bright, outgoing child.

“Armaan has started talking at home,” Zaheer, Armaan’s father, says delightedly. “He tells us stories about his day and what his friends did. He is such a social child now!”

But it was only when Armaan scored an A+ in 2nd Standard that his parents truly realised that he could lead a normal life. Despite no special testing accommodations, Armaan has progressed to the Class 6.

With the help of a physiotherapist, Armaan is accomplishing many other milestones too: handling money, walking independently through a crowd, going to the shops, and lately, learning to ride a bike. He is also a chess player with a sportsman spirit; although he loves winning, he can take a loss with a smile too.

That is not to say that there aren’t challenges. It is physically difficult for Armaan to keep up with the speed of learning in class. And this is only going to get tougher as he progresses to higher education. But the entire family chips in; his dad teaches him math and grammar and his mother the languages.

They know Armaan will only have to work harder in the future. But they are optimistic and ready to face any obstacle right alongside him.

“I really wanted to play volleyball with my friends during P.E because I get very bored sitting alone. Rupal Ma’am took me to the court and asked my friends to include me in their team. So, I like her very much and she is my favourite teacher!”, says Armaan.

meet
ASHWIN KATARIA

Age 10 years

Child with visual impairment

Class 2,
Christ church School, Lucknow

Supported by: Consortium for
Inclusive Education

Ashwin’s visual impairment and a childhood spent in and out of hospitals has not stopped him from pursuing learning. He is a curious little boy who absolutely loves interacting with gadgets and familiarising himself with new technologies.

Ashwin was born in Dubai in 2007 with a completely normal delivery. But, when Ashwin was 3, his mother, Anjali, noticed white spots on his retina and rushed him to the hospital. Doctors confirmed that Ashwin was going through a retinal detachment and advised the family to seek advanced treatment in India.



The next couple of years were difficult: Ashwin went through 4 major eye surgeries in Bangalore. Although he had retained some blurred vision after the first three operations, the fourth caused him to lose his eyesight almost completely.

After losing his eyesight, schooling in Dubai was not an option. Mainstream schools refused to admit children with special needs, and the schools for blind children only taught in Arabic.

With no other choices, the family decided to permanently move back to India (Kanpur) so that Ashwin could learn in an inclusive setting. But their problems didn’t stop here. Even in Kanpur, no mainstream schools were willing to admit him. His parents were at a loss about what to do.

Ashwin started at a school for blind children, but it was a short-lived experience. Anjali was not happy with the quality of education and ultimately, she decided that it would be better to homeschool her son.

Ashwin’s parents knew he had an appetite for learning. He grasps concepts simply by listening to his older brother studying. “Ashwin is so knowledgeable and well-informed that its often he who is informing his parents of what’s happening around the world”, Anjali says laughingly.

Ashwin deserves an excellent education that can help him grow into himself and lead a fulfilling life. And that’s all they really wanted for their son.

Ashwin spent a lot of time being homeschooled by his mother. Anjali says his favourite subjects are Mathematics and Science, although he doesn’t much care for the languages.

It was very exhausting for Anjali. She is not a trained special educator. So, it was difficult to even figure out how to teach Ashwin. Most of his lessons at home were entirely verbal, meaning they required an incredible amount of time commitment from his parents. With their elder son studying for board exams, it was incredibly hard making sure that both kids got the attention they needed.

But the family has persisted. Ashwin is set to be enrolled in 2nd standard at a school that will help him transition to a mainstream institution within two years. Yes, the school is in Lucknow and they are still figuring out the logistics, but they are optimistic.

Ashwin is a bright child and with inclusive education, they are confident that he will live a successful, and most importantly, happy life.

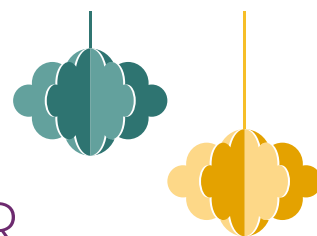


did you know...

Growing up, **champion swimmer Michael Phelps** was continually criticized by teachers for his inability to sit still, and was formally diagnosed with ADHD when he was in fifth grade. After being on Ritalin for over two years, Phelps chose to stop using the drug and instead used swimming to help him find focus. His choice clearly paid off, as he ended his Olympic career as the most highly decorated Olympian of all time, boasting 22 medals (18 of them being gold).



meet DEVASHISH KUMAR



Age 18 years

Child with visual impairment

Class 12
Urmi School, Chetan Balwadi,
Vadodara

Devashish Kumar is an exceptionally intelligent young man, who just graduated from higher secondary school with distinction - the topper in his school. Always regarded as a bit of a genius, Devashish is applauded for his extraordinary memory, beautiful personality, and sheer determination to overcome challenges.



At four months, Devashish's parents (Omprakash and Rashmi) realised that he was not looking around like other babies his age. When they found that he had Cortical Visual Insufficiency (CVI) with Cerebral Palsy, it was nothing short of a shock.

Their life changed overnight: it was now over-run by constant trips to doctors and therapists. Along with two stem cell transfusions, Devashish had regular sessions for physiotherapy, occupational therapy, visual stimulation and speech therapy. The family visited a number of doctors in medical centres across the country - including Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Mumbai and Vadodara.

Devashish started schooling with a mainstream institution - although he was segregated from regular classes and learnt with a group of differently-abled children at first. It was quickly obvious that he was intelligent - he could recite the Hanuman Chalisa from memory in front of an audience in preschool. With an IQ well above average, and an ability to remember things at one go, Devashish excelled in school.

Devashish was settled so well in the preschool that when they were forced to change the school, the new environment was a jolt for him. He initially learnt alongside a group of disabled children. But Devashish didn't exactly fit in a specialised setting. His excellent IQ meant that he learnt at a much faster pace which demanded an equivalent learning atmosphere.

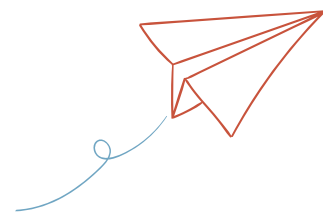
At his parents' request, Devashish was integrated into a mainstream setting in Class 2 on trial basis. The change in environment was difficult for the young child to handle - he was irritant and had fierce temper tantrums. But over time, with support from his parents, Devashish became acclimated to the larger classes and regular educational delivery. He was attentive during class, absorbing the lessons by listening to his teachers.

Consistently at the top of his class, Devashish skipped a grade. To supplement his lectures in school, his parents taught and tested him verbally. Class 6 onwards his parents continued to teach him and recorded what they taught. These recorded audios were used by Devashish for better learning.

A loving and affectionate child, Devashish has always won praise from his teachers. He ranked 2nd in SSC (10th) and 1st in his HSC (12th) board examinations. His success story has been published through leading newspapers and news channels to encourage other differently-abled students (and their parents) to realise their dreams through inclusive education. Devashish had interacted with Dr Karen Fisher from Georgia, America a well known Social Psychologist and Counselor who visited his school in January 2020. She met him and was quite impressed by his in-depth knowledge and reasoning.

An inclusive education has prepared Devashish to confront any life challenge head-on. He has always dreamt of pursuing music, astrology and psychology. Now, despite the ample challenges ahead, the world is his oyster and he looks forward to accomplishing great heights.

meet DARPAN INANI



Age 26 years

Person with visual impairment

Chartered Accountancy Student;
International Chess Player

Baroda High School Alkapuri;
Maharaja Sayajirao University,
Vadodara

Supported by: Ms. Promila Zalpuri

Darpan's success story is one-in-a-million: Afflicted with the Stevens Johnson syndrome, he lost his eyesight aged 3. Today, he is a national and world chess champion.

Darpan and his family have always adhered to the motto, If something doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. Although his diagnosis was heart-breaking, they were determined to make sure Darpan was integrated with the mainstream in every aspect of life.



Inclusive education became the first step to realising their dream.

Darpan had received absolutely no formal schooling until age 8 - it was a nightmare convincing schools to accept him. However, once he began his journey with inclusive education, there was no stopping him!

Darpan was the only blind child in a school with over two thousand children. With very few audiobooks and e-books available at the time, his parents typed out his textbooks so that he could read them using screen-reading softwares. They also tutored him in practical skills like accounting. It was difficult to adapt to a school environment at first. But soon he had made friends and was learning computer skills to make learning easier.

Darpan consistently scored over 90% and ranked amongst the top 3 in cohort. After his 12th boards, he went on to complete his B. Com from Maharaja Sayajirao University of , Vadodara. He is also working on his Chartered Accountancy qualification. Darpan's performance in the CAT entrance tests have earned him a place in some of India's most prestigious management school- the IIMs- but he has deferred his admission to pursue his main passion: chess.

Darpan started playing chess because it was the only game he could play with his sighted peers, without any modifications or dispensations. "Chess was about vision," he says, "not visibility."

Top players can play the game blindfolded, but learning the game without sight was a whole different ballgame. Darpan was often refused coaching because trainers were apprehensive about his grasping abilities. Moreover, he couldn't easily access most of the online chess training programs.

But Darpan persevered. He doubled down on his training, figuring out how to access the learning material and practicing moves on a specially designed chessboard for the Visually impaired. He went on to play in national and international championship tournaments, becoming the youngest player to win the Blind National A title at 16.

In 2018, Darpan became the only Indian ever to win an international prize in the French Creon Open Chess tournament. As of 2020, he is Asia's highest-rated blind chess player, the first to achieve an ELO rating of over 2100.

Darpan credits his success to his inclusive education: he never felt different from his sighted peers, which gave him the confidence to compete against sighted players and improve his game. Darpan has since used public speaking platforms like TedxYouth to inspire others to a mainstream education.

Darpan's next goal is to become an international master. He knows there will be obstacles aplenty, but he is confident in his ability to overcome them.

meet
DHARA PANCHAMIYA



Age 29 years

Person with speech and hearing impairment

Mother; Artist; Former Assistant Manager; DCB Bank; Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara

Supported by: Akshar Trust for Hearing Impaired Children

Dhara graduated from Maharaja Sayajirao University with a Master's degree in Commerce, defying expectations of many who doubted her ability to achieve success.

Dhara was born in Dhanbad, a small town in Jharkhand, with a hearing impairment. The town had scarce resources for deaf children. So, Dhara's mother, Jayshree, had to drive 4 hours to Jamshedpur to take her daughter to specialists to explore early intervention options. At the time, this was the only way to access resources that helped Dhara and her family communicate with each other.



It was a taxing time to say the least. All her parents hoped for at that point was for Dhara to achieve basic social development and to grow up and learn in a comfortable environment. With this goal in mind, Dhara's parents moved to Vadodara - a small city with support facilities for hearing impaired children.

Dhara spent almost a year getting regular assistance with communication techniques, including learning American Sign Language (ASL). Once she had learnt her basic R's, inclusive education became the family's next goal.

Mainstream schools had no special educators or counsellors. Few understood the accommodations required for a special needs child, especially in a class setting with over 40 children. But Dhara was an exceptionally bright child, determined not to give up.

A teacher herself, Jayshree advocated Dhara's schools for accommodations which helped her excel in studies - including exemptions for language subjects, which were particularly difficult for her because of her impairment. Her teachers made sure she succeeded, even if it meant spending extra time with her to explain difficult concepts. And because of this, Dhara scored 100% in 2 subjects in her 12th board exams.

Although she always knew she was different from others her age, inclusive education let Dhara feel she was with them too, her mother proudly says. Dhara taught sign language to her school friends and used drawings to communicate with them. In no time, she became a well-liked student and on academic footing with her peers.

From a mild, shy toddler with difficulty communicating, inclusive education helped Dhara grow up into a bold, independent woman capable of advocating for her rights.

In university, she made sure that she received education (with any special provisions necessary) even if she was the only student in class. Dhara secured a job and became financially independent even before completing her Master's.

Along with her studies, Dhara also pursued her passion in arts and crafts. She participated in exhibitions showcasing her handicrafts and paintings, and received much appreciation and encouragement from artists across Gujarat. She is now helping disabled children learn to build foundational skills through art.

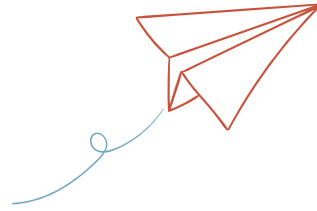
Today, Dhara is a part-time artist and a proud full-time mother to an 18-month old hearing-impaired boy. Much like her own mother, she is devoting her complete attention to her son's social development. Dhara is committed to ensuring that he experiences the joys of an inclusive education.

"Inclusive education made me more confident about myself. I received a lot of help from my teachers, which made me successful in life. Today, apart from working and raising a son, I am also an artist. I have showcased my paintings at exhibitions across Vadodara and Ahmedabad for much appreciation and encouragement.", says Dhara.



meet

ESHA RAVINDRA BUCH



Age 31 years

Person with down syndrome

IT Professional
Urmi School, Rangam Infotech,
Vadodara

Supported by: All India Federation of
Down syndrome

Born with Down Syndrome (DS), Esha has faced challenges every step of her life. In a testament to her strength, spirit and determination, Esha rose from the dark ness of her struggles and transformed into the beautiful, lively and independent individual she is today.



Esha's diagnosis was a very heartfelt process for her parents who had never even heard of DS before. But they travelled across India, talking to specialists and researchers in the field, who gave them the confidence that Esha could lead a full life, if dealt with care.

Her mother took up the challenge of making sure Esha lead a as normal a life as any other child, and inclusive education became not merely a goal but a necessity for her unhindered growth. Esha, too, was desperate to follow in her older brother's footsteps and determined not be left behind.

But DS is often looked down upon, with the wider society having little understanding of what it entails. Esha had to change 10 schools within a span of 12 weeks - most refusing admission by citing excuses of objections by other students and parents or their incapacity to teach special needs children.

Nevertheless, Esha secured admission in a mainstream school, based on her dedication and vivaciousness. Her integration was smooth-sailing. In no time, she was a darling of the teachers, the staff and her peers, actively participating in every extra-curricular activity she could - including sports and dancing. "Esha has an endearing habit - ingrained by her mother - of greeting each and every person she meets with a smile, and this made her an instant success in school," her father says.

Esha's father salutes his wife - who passed away after fighting cancer for 11 years - for Esha's self-reliance and success. She undertook the challenge of making sure Esha always had the best of everything, trained her in life skills and became her pillar of strength. Even whilst battling her illness, she took Esha under her wing, making sure that her little girl was prepared to tackle life head-on.

Her passing away was difficult, but Esha has persisted and taken all of her mother's lessons to heart. Today, she not only looks after herself and her father, but also deftly manages the entire household. Equipped with IT skills her mother taught her, she works as an IT professional as well.

But above all her accomplishments - which include an award for the most self-educated DS individual by the Down Syndrome Federation of India - her father is most impressed by her unique ability to connect with people. She remembers each and every birthday of their vast extended family members and wish them at 12 midnight on the dot.

Esha's father is thankful that God gave them the strength to face their tests and trials. Esha's DS was never a weakness for her or her family, but merely a part of life they accepted and took into stride. And their attitude made all the difference.

As her father puts it: "Esha's story has given courage to so many other parents of children with DS. She is testament to how any child, given love, affection and support of their family can fight life's challenges and achieve all that they desire."



did you know...

One of the most famous scientists of the 20th century is confined to a wheelchair, immobile and has a computer system that allows him to communicate.

Stephen William Hawking was attending Cambridge when he lost his balance and fell down the stairs. Shortly after, he was diagnosed with motor neuron disease or a form of ALS.

He was told he would not survive more than a few years before the debilitating disease shut down his bodily functions. But Stephen Hawking's renowned career continued for over 40 years.

His publications on physics and fan-favorite research on black holes have made him an academic celebrity. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and in 2009 was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the US.



meet
HASSAN AJMERI

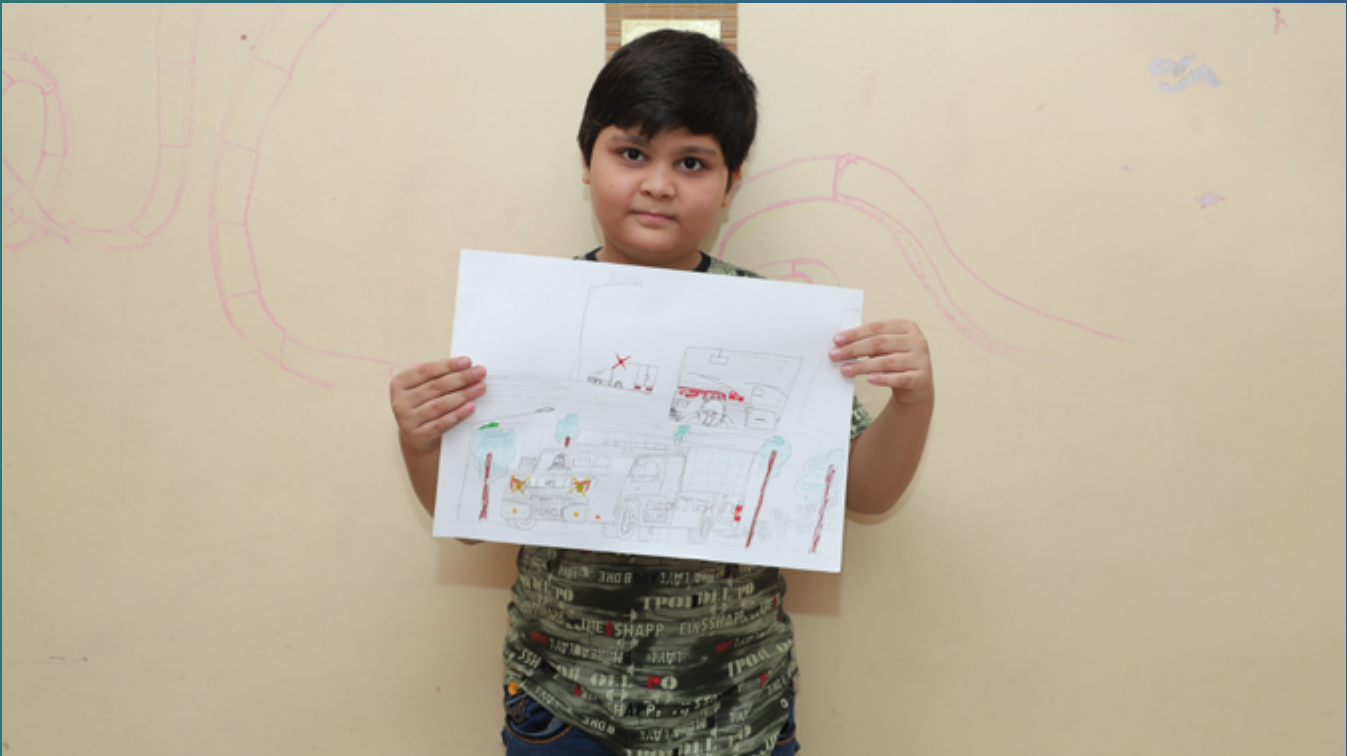
Age 9 years

Child with autism

1st Standard
Bright School, Vadodara

Supported by: Disha school and
Autism center

“We honestly never thought Hassan would be at this point today. He is a completely different person from who he was at the beginning!” Sonia Ajmeri, Hassan’s mother says.



And it is true. Hassan was diagnosed with autism at three and a half years of age. He spoke with echolalia (continuous repetition) and low pitch, and had several behavioural issues. But today he goes to a mainstream school, fits in amazingly well with his teachers and classmates and is at the top of his class in academics.

The journey has not been easy at all, Sonia says. His diagnosis was a bit of a shock for them. “He used to be irritable,” she says, “but we thought that was just a result of staying ill.”

Sonia and her husband, Rasik, decided to send Hassan to a centre for autistic kids in Vadodara, where he worked with therapists for over 4 years. In the beginning, he did not talk, much less socialise and make eye contact. And because he couldn’t convey his needs and wants, he shouted and threw tantrums instead. After undergoing a combination of therapies, Hassan transformed into an independent child, with excellent communication skills.

“Hassan gets along very well with his friends,” Sonia says. Yes, he is older than them but he still thinks like them, which made it very easy to integrate him in school. He works independently in school and can confidently ask questions and communicate his needs to teachers.

Hassan loves studying English, but his favourite part is drawing. He sketches and colours anything he observes - especially vehicles. Hassan is emerging into a true artist, his parents believe.

That is not to say that there are not challenges aplenty. Hassan is not often able to participate in sports because he cannot fully comprehend their rules or deal with losing. So, he is not yet used to playing with his friends. And even as independent he is, Hassan still needs extensive support in studying and doing his homework.

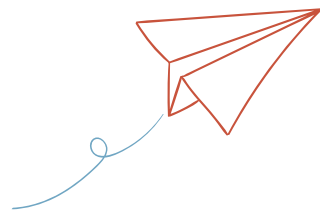
But now that he has adjusted to school over the past 2 years, the next goal for the family is to engage him in activities. Sonia is looking at cultivating his talent in art - a hobby he truly enjoys - by sending him to drawing classes where he could learn to collaborate artistically with his peers. Sonia is also helping him learn at home. It can be time-consuming and exhausting, but she is happy that she can manage until he proceeds to higher classes.

Yet, Sonia and Rasik are delighted and grateful at how far he has come. His formal education is only just beginning, but the future looks very bright indeed. They pray to God that mainstream education becomes more inclusive so that children like Hassan can, at the very least, learn to become self-dependent and survive in life.

“Hassan goes to school happy and comes back happier - what more could we ask for!”



meet
KAIZAN H. BIPLODWALA



Age 18 years

Child with Visual Impairment

12th Standard, Mini Cama High School; Baroda High School; Disha Special School and Autism Centre

Supported by: Blind Person's Association, Ahmedabad

“Kaizan wouldn’t open his eyes when he was born – we knew right away that something was wrong,” Anahita (his mother) said.



Kaizan was born with corneal opacity, a rare condition in new-borns, which left his vision cloudy. Within a matter of weeks, Kaizan underwent multiple operations on both his eyes, which ultimately left him entirely unable to see.

His family accepted his condition early on. They knew that he would need special attention and a lot of support moving forward, and made sure he had exactly that. Kaizan’s first school – an institution for special-needs children – was a poor fit academically. Since most of the other students were autistic, they learnt at a significantly different pace than him.

In 2nd standard, Anahita shifted Kaizan to a mainstream school, and so began his remarkable inclusive education journey. “We were very fortunate,” Anahita said. “All of Kaizan’s teachers were extremely supportive. They knew the kind of support and help he needed, and were always mindful in that regard. Kaizan never had to face discrimination or social issues at school.”

In fact, his classmates were extremely helpful and always happy to help, both inside and outside the classroom. Apart from a few isolated incidents when he was younger – when children simply did not understand that Kaizan was different, he had an excellent time at school. “Kaizan was so close to his classmates that sometimes they would anticipate his needs even before he could voice them. The kids fussed over him and helped him take care of his things, even holding his hand to guide him to the washroom,” Anahita said laughingly.

“The most important aspect was that my son always felt included,” she added. Kaizan had the chance to participate in any activity he wished and his teachers made sure he never felt excluded or marginalised. He especially enjoyed painting and even occasionally played football with his peers.

That is not to say that there were not challenges involved. Not everyone understands how to behave with disabled children. “Often people showed ‘sympathy’ which frustrated me to no end- we didn’t want it!” Anahita said. “Kaizan is smart and he can grasp things even I struggle with, like technology. Because he learns differently, he has developed and honed a near-perfect memory too. So there’s no place for sympathy! All they want is for others to treat him like a regular kid, who loves music, travelling and good food!”

Learning can be an extremely taxing process for visually impaired students. Kaizan missed what was taught at school. But his mother took up the challenge. She spent recess and after school hours taking notes of the material covered so that she could teach Kaizan in turn. Nevertheless, absorbing knowledge purely through listening can be challenging. Still, Kaizan makes every effort to learn constantly via interacting, acquire knowledge and stay connected with the outside world. His hard work is evident in his achievements. Kaizan scored 76 percentile in 12th and plans to pursue a sociology degree next!

“Khai, pi ne maja (Eat, drink and be merry), and be cheerful always!”, says Kaizan.



meet
MEDHAVI SAXENA

Age 34 years

Person with speech and hearing impairment

User Interface Expert in Dallas (US)
Mount Carmel, Ahmedabad;
St. Xavier's Loyola; National
Institute of Fashion Technology
(NIFT) Gandhinagar; University of
Philadelphia

Supported by: Umang Ahmedabad

"We now belong to that world - the world of the hearing challenged," Medhavi's father, Ravi Saxena said. "And I can give you hundreds of success stories [of hearing impaired children]." Medhavi's story is one such tale of courage, bravery and commendable fortitude.

Medhavi Saxena was born with a hearing impairment in 1986 - when there were barely any resources on how to engage a deaf child. In fact, her parent's only option at the time was getting expensive and time-consuming postal guidance from a US-based institute.



Although they lived in Ahmedabad, Ravi admitted Medhavi to a school for deaf in Chennai because of its reputation. Thereafter, Medhavi joined a small group of deaf children learning from an American trained special educator. Here, she was gradually introduced to the concept of sound through vibrations, lip and tongue movements. Next, Medhavi learnt to reproduce sounds and understand their meanings. "It was a huge undertaking," Ravi says. And the learning process wasn't limited to the child. Medhavi's parents were also educated in profoundly sounding their words so that she could imitate and learn. Even today, she and her parents use these techniques to communicate with each other.

Medhavi's journey for inclusive education began when the family moved back to Ahmedabad. But she faced discrimination and difficulties with social integration throughout school, college and even at work. For the simple reason that people have to work harder to assimilate a challenged individual into regular activities, it creates an excluding environment, Ravi believes. Moreover, even with prerequisites like top-notch hearing aids and FM speakers, teaching hearing impaired children can be a task of "elephantine" proportions for mainstream teachers with no special training.

But Medhavi's mother, Poonam, was always there to provide her with emotional and educational support. Her parents interacted with her round the clock, to fill her educational gap and make sure she never felt left out. Medhavi topped her NIFT entrance test and joined their fashion designing program. Her four years at college were a struggle but she persisted, and went on to work for leading fashion houses in India.

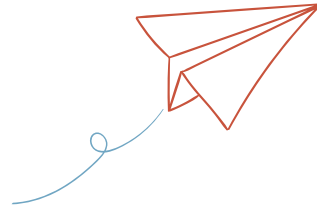
However, Medhavi felt discriminated and left out in the fast-paced environment. So, she decided to make a change and pursue a 3-year MS degree in interactive media and design in the US - living independently for the very first time in her life.

Despite its challenges, an inclusive education gave Medhavi the confidence to step out into the world and succeed. Today, she is a User Interface expert in Dallas, self-dependent for all her needs - even during the current lockdown period. And she speaks with such clarity that one can barely tell she is hearing impaired.

"Today, I can say with a certain degree of confidence that Medhavi is one in 10,000 children speaking with such clarity. She is so self-sufficient that she spent the entire lockdown period on her own in Dallas.", says Medhavi's father.



meet MAITREYA SHAH



Age 31 years

Person with Visual Impairment

Lawyer; Incoming LLM Candidate; LAMP Fellow; Disability Rights Activist; Gujarat National Law University; University of Pennsylvania Law School; PRS India; Enable Me-Access

Supported by: Urmi School

Maitreya was 11 when a cricket ball changed his life.

A care-free child and full of life, Maitreya was hit by a ball while playing cricket and lost his eyesight completely. The following days (and years) were a nightmare for the little boy: depressed, he would lock himself in his room, trying to come to terms with his new situation.



It was equally difficult for his parents; to not only bear what had happened to their son, but also guide him through what would be the most challenging time in his life then. Circumstances only became more trying because of the attitudes of their friends and family, who stopped inviting them to social gatherings. Ultimately, Maitreya's parents had to limit their social presence.

"But we stood together as a family and my mother was the strongest amongst all of us," Maitreya says. "My mother helped me view life in a better way, which aided me in developing a positive attitude towards the challenges before me.

Maitreya's parents accepted his disability and their new goal became to empower him. Their best decision was in making sure he went to a mainstream school, Maitreya says. Although he faced many challenges - from being the only blind student to learning from teachers who had no training in special education, he overcame them through sheer determination and his parents' step-by-step support.

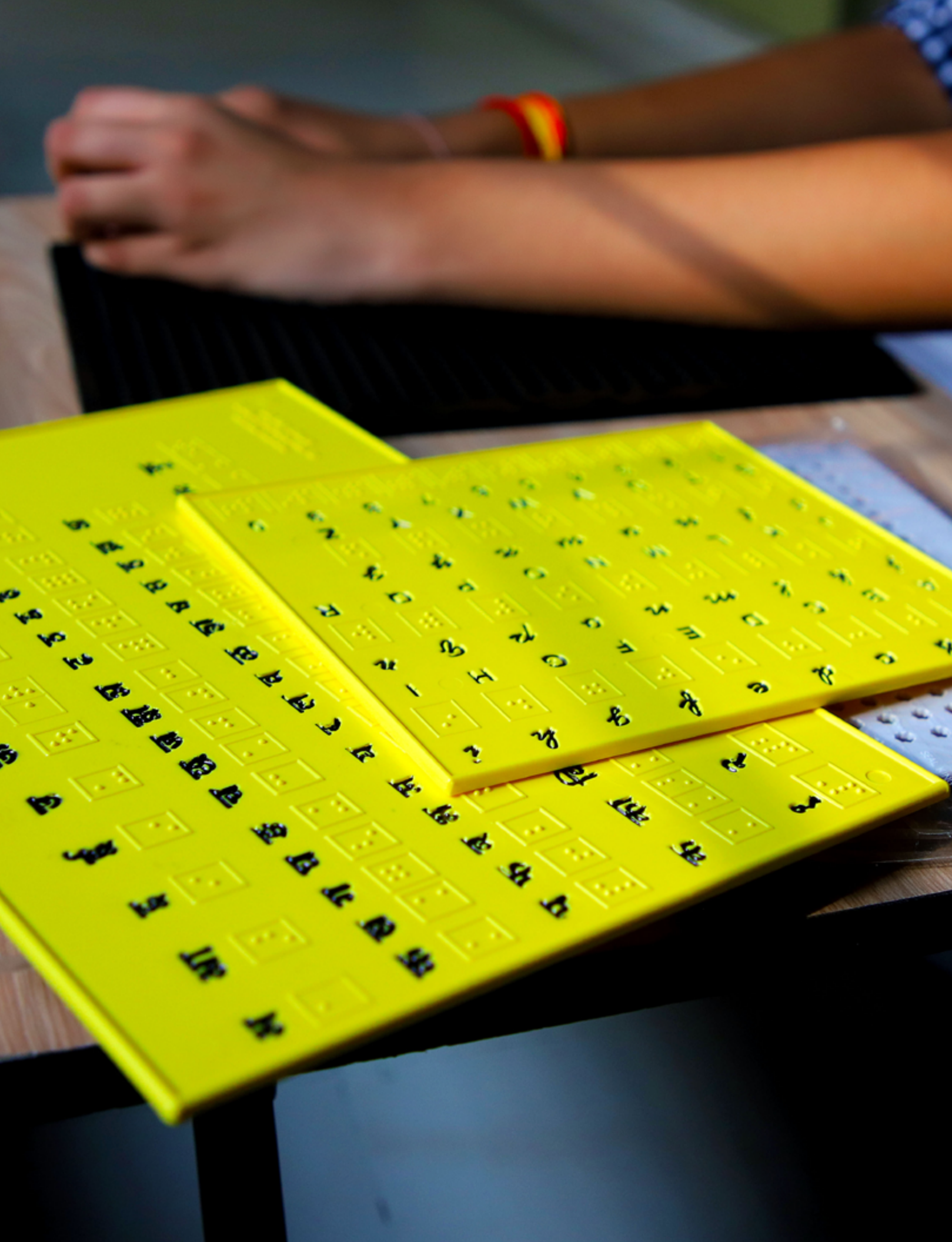
In 2013, Maitreya was denied a scribe by the Gujarat board for his board exams. Authorities were "apathetic", he recalls, with some officials commenting that his parents should just send him to learn music instead of making him study. It hurt him deeply to realise that disabled persons could be sidelined and treated with such dismissal.

His experience motivated Maitreya to pursue law. As the first blind student at his law school, he had to work hard to assemble the needed support. He spearheaded a project with 12 universities across India to create extensive disability policies related to inclusive education, admissions, accessibility and curriculum. He has also contributed to the India Parallel Report to United Nations Committee on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Today, Maitreya is a well-recognised figure in the field of disability rights activism.

Maitreya is also a recipient of the JN TATA Endowment grant, and is currently working as a Legislative Assistant to Member of Parliament (LAMP) Fellow, being the first blind person to have been selected for both the prestigious opportunities. He was also accepted to 4 of US's top law schools (UC Berkeley, NYU, Georgetown, and University of Pennsylvania), and has elected to pursue his LLM at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania, where he was awarded a full Dean's Merit Scholarship.

Maitreya believes that the challenges he faced throughout schooling helped shape him into the person he is today - "ready to take over the world". Now, he is set to work relentlessly on achieving his next dream: to be an attorney in New York, working to secure rights of persons with disabilities under international laws.

"I had the privilege of a very supportive family that stood by me through thick and thin. I believe the best way to achieve something is to work relentlessly for it. It might get tiring and depressing, but never give up. Once you achieve what you want, it is very satisfactory."



| did you know...

Musician, writer and musical producer of Italian origin, **Andrea Bocelli** has sold more than 75 million records.

He was born with congenital glaucoma that left him partially blind, something that did not prevent him from taking piano lessons until the age of six.

However, at age 12 he suffered a blow during a football game that left him completely blind. Endowed with a spirit of innate improvement, he decided to focus entirely on music, specifically on singing. He also studied Law.

Bocelli has received numerous awards of international prestige and even has a beach named after him on the Adriatic.



meet NAMAN BHATT

Age 17 years

Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

10th Standard, Apnatva Centre;
National Institute of Open Schooling
(NIOS); Meera Special School; Baroda
High School

Supported by: Apnatva School,
Vadodara

Naman's journey has been a series of ups and downs. At one point, his mother (Mudra) did not think that her son would ever be a part of society. But today, the family is filled with hopes and dreams and enthusiastically planning for Naman's future.

Naman had problems in school right from the start. His playschool teachers complained that his behaviour was not normal. He would not mix with his peers and was hyperactive. But his parents simply attributed the issue to the teachers' lack of attention and a culture shock with their relocation from Vadodara to Pune. They moved back so that Naman would be comfortable in school, however, he continued to experience similar issues.



"It was very difficult for us to accept that Naman had a problem," Mudra said. "And this probably delayed the early intervention that he should have received."

Naman's social behaviour became acutely difficult as he entered his teens and underwent hormonal changes. Although he had adjusted to a special schooling pattern during his primary schooling, he suddenly became extremely aggressive, unpredictable and erratic. He would randomly hit people passing by and experienced fits of rage when controlling him became almost impossible.

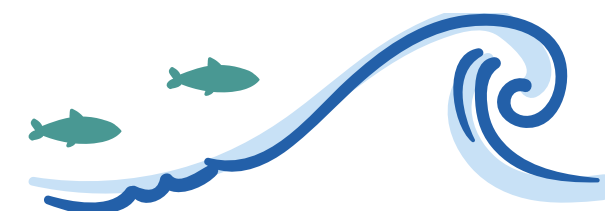
They reached a point when it was unthinkable to even step out of the house with Naman, or even leave his side. "We also had to pull him out of school, which was a very difficult decision for me, as a teacher," Mudra added. "The next three years were perhaps the lowest point for us. I felt so isolated and alone, and I did not think that the situation would ever improve."

But gradually, she came to terms with the situation. She sought treatment and over time, with medication, Naman's behaviour improved. The family adjusted their attitude too. They surrounded Naman with an atmosphere of encouragement. "Society will only accept him if his parents do. So we made it a point to treat him like any other child," Mudra elaborates. They taught him, worked on his interests and gave him every opportunity to learn while ensuring he felt comfortable with his environment.

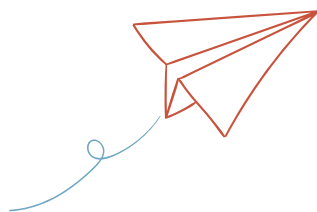
The change did wonders for Naman. His learning is delayed and requires hard work, but with patience, he does grasp new skills and knowledge. Naman is no longer hyperactive, with his energy being diverted to a whole host of extra-curricular activities, including arts and craft, computers, skating, swimming and cycling. He even chips in with chores at home (Naman loves being in the kitchen!) and prays regularly with his mother.

Naman also attends a small centre for special children, where he gets along with his teachers and peers. Mudra is confident that his future will only be brighter! Their target for the next two years is clear: closely observing Naman to see where his interest lies and what he can earn a living in. While Naman prepares to sit for his 12th board exams in a couple of years, his family is already thinking about possibilities to make him absolutely independent.

As Naman's mother puts it, "Our experience taught me two things: to always be positive, surround my child with positivity and encouragement; and to always have faith in God. God, and the support of our friends and family helped us cope with the challenges we faced."



meet
RUCHIT SHILOTE



Age 32 years

Person with speech and hearing impairment

Software Test Analyst at Paul Mason Consulting Pvt. Ltd.; Shree Sayaji High School; Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara

Supported by: Akshar Trust for Hearing Impaired Children

“I proved myself to anyone who doubted me,” Ruchit said. “I worked hard and overcame two of my biggest challenges: learning to speak and lip-read, and completing higher education.”



Ruchit was born with a hearing impairment that rendered him almost completely deaf. At the time, it was doubtful if he would ever speak clearly or ever go to “normal” school. Today, Ruchit is a graduate from Maharaja Sayajirao University in Accounting and Auditing, and works as a Software Test Analyst for a multi-national company in Vadodara.

As part of an early intervention program, Ruchit enrolled at Akshar Trust, a school for the deaf, at the age of 5. Apart from learning ASL, Ruchit underwent intensive speech therapy, in which his therapists helped him sound his words with the help of an audio-piece.

“My parents didn’t know ASL initially. It became my goal to improve my speech as much as possible so that I could talk easily to my parents... Without Akshar, I probably couldn’t have done it,” Ruchit says - with perfect coherency in a testament to how far he has come.

Once Ruchit had completed his primary education, and once he felt much more confident and prepared to take on a challenge, he was integrated into a mainstream school. Despite his speech therapy, Ruchit was in for a shock when he entered the new environment.

Even though he sat in the front of the class, he often missed a massive amount of what the teachers said. And because educators had little understanding of his condition, they simply assumed that Ruchit was learning with his peers. The quick pace of teaching meant that he often didn’t have to time to catch-up with the concepts during school and had to cover them again at Akshar.

What’s more, Ruchit was suddenly thrust into a highly-charged environment with kids often talking over each other - making it that much more difficult to interact with his peers.

It took time, patience and a lot of therapy, but Ruchit adapted. He gave everything he could to learn lip-reading skills and improving his speech. It gradually became easier to communicate with his classmates, and Ruchit went on build life-long friendships at school. *“I still have those friends today. We went together from school to college. Not only did they help me with my studies but they were always there to support me,”* Ruchit says.

Ruchit’s parents only ever hoped that he would complete his 12th boards. They never imagined that he would reach the point he has today. But Ruchit persisted through sheer grit and overwhelming determination, never letting his impairment limit him.

Ruchit’s journey was rife with incredibly difficult challenges. But he is proud of his accomplishments. He set himself two goals - mastering speech and graduating from college - and he accomplished both, exceeding even his parents’ expectations.

“My family and friends were my support system who boosted my confidence. Because of them, I completed my BCom and am happy and settled in my career today.”



meet
RIYA GHATAK



Age 21 years

Person with Autism Spectrum Disorder

3rd Year BS Home Science Student
Home Science College, Maharaja Sayajirao University; National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS); DR Amin School; Meera The Happy School; Vidyani Vidyalaya

Supported by: Seher, Ek Udaan

Diagnosed as mildly autistic, Riya was a slow learner with associated behavioural issues. “Her diagnosis was no doubt a stressful time, but we were extremely positive minded and determined to fight it. And the first step towards this was very early intervention - Riya started counselling in 1st standard itself,” Sudipta said.

Although Riya’s parents were determined to ensure that she received an inclusive education, their experience was often frustrating. Riya was a simple, happy-go-lucky and friendly girl. Yet, she was often side-lined in school activities, often pulling her out of performances (or making her less visible) at the last minute without understanding how hurt she must feel.



Moreover, Riya’s school refused to let her continue after completing 1st Standard, saying that they lacked sufficient resources, such as provisions for a shadow teacher. For the next three years, she attended an integrated school but she did not adjust well. With teachers changing almost every six months, Riya lacked the attention and support she needed to grow.

But the situation eventually improved. Riya was happy at her last school, which she attended until 9th grade. The teachers were supportive, understood her social and learning difficulties better and were always available to spend extra time to help her. However, Riya continued to experience problems with Mathematics, and despite having a disability certificate, she could not get an exemption for the subject from the education board. The board only granted admissions for ‘mentally retarded’ children - a term Riya’s parents strongly, and rightly, objected to. The authorities did not recognise autism spectrum disorder at all. Sudipta Riya’s mother therefore had no choice but to pull her daughter from school.

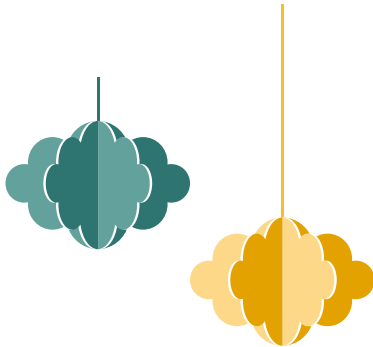
This did not stop Riya from pursuing further education via open schooling. She completed her 10th and 12th boards with an impressive 68 percent, as well as a hotel management course in between her studies.

Today, Riya is in the 3rd year of a B.Sc. degree in Human Development and Family Studies. “She loves going to college and never misses a day,” Sudipta said. “She is very friendly with not only her peers, but also her teachers - all of whom are always willing to help her with anything she needs.”

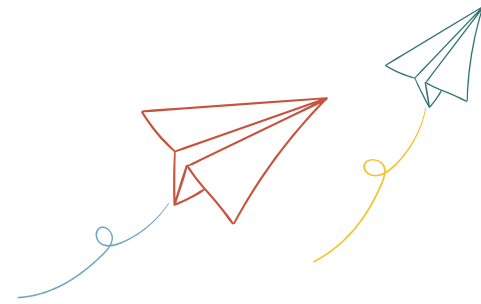
There are still many challenges ahead. Although Riya can function normally and complete all her routine tasks independently, she still has communication and behaviour problems. “I worry that Riya may not be able to apply the knowledge she is gaining in a practical setting,” Sudipta added.

But they have hope for Riya’s future: Once she has completed her studies, Sudipta plans to have Riya shadow her father at work and experience different roles to find the best fit for her. She hopes this will give Riya some much-needed exposure and prepare her for a career. Riya’s foray into the working life will not be easy.

Nevertheless, with the unwavering support of her friends and family, and with the skills she has attained during her inclusive education journey, she will undoubtedly have a brilliant future.



meet RUDRA SONI



Age 16 years

Child with Visual Impairment

11th Standard, Utkarsh Gujarati
Medium; Baroda High School
Alkapuri

Supported by: Baroda High School,
Vadodara

“Rudra’s journey has not been his alone. It’s an adventure that we, as a family, have gone on together. What a beautiful experience it has been!” Rudra’s father, Nirav, said.



This shared journey has let Rudra’s parents look at the world around them in an entirely new light as they became his eyes to the outside world.

Rudra was five months old when his parents first realised that he couldn’t see. He was diagnosed with a rare, incurable genetic disorder, Retinitis Pigmentosa.

“It was quite painful some time,” Nirav said. “But after consulting specialists for two years with no solution, we focused on Rudra’s studies.”

The family sent Rudra to a mainstream playgroup because they wanted to ensure that, from the very beginning, their son grew up in an inclusive environment that maximised his academic and social development. They wanted him surrounded by children of diverse backgrounds instead of going to specialised schools that could make him feel excluded.

But mainstream formal education was a whole different ball game. Although Rudra was ultimately accepted, his teachers were not experienced with handling a special needs student and Rudra was so young that it was difficult for him to follow what was taught purely by listening.

“We had a role model, however. Talking to another blind student in the same school gave us a lot of motivation. It made us determined not to give up,” Nirav added. Rudra’s mother started accompanying him to school; first she sat outside to collect school work in-between his lessons, and when that didn’t work, she got special permission to sit in his classes and take notes.

The arrangement continued for almost three years, but it was by no means a feasible long-term solution: teachers were uncomfortable having a parent observe their class and as Rudra grew up, he had to learn to be independent. From then on, learning became just a bonus of going to school. Their main focus was for Rudra to learn patience, to interact with other kids and deal with being excluded by his peers sometimes.

“We started teaching him at home by reading to him. We didn’t want him listening to audiobooks all by himself because we thought he may feel too isolated,” Nirav said. “We travelled, taking Rudra to experience new places by touch and described everything we saw to him in detail. We even made diagrams and graphs out of toothpicks so that he could visualise what he studied.”

The challenges are only going to get tougher ahead but Rudra and his parents are confident they can face them together. Rudra is smart, has a tremendous sense of humour and boasts of talents like singing, playing the tabla and mimicry! He can think critically, challenge and debate arguments and articulate his point-of-view. He is clear about his future too: Rudra wants to emulate the blindfolded Lady Justice and become a judge. With 77 percent in his 10th boards, he is already on his way to achieving his dreams!

| did you know...

Helen Adams Keller was an author, political activists and lecturer. She became sick at a young age, and the illness took her sight and hearing.

It took years before Helen could learn how to communicate. Without being able to see or hear, she had no grasp of what language was. A teacher hired by Hellen's parents named Anne Sullivan finally made a breakthrough allowing Hellen to blossom.

Sullivan used a technique of spelling words into the palms of Helen's hands and allowing her to feel the letters. Her first word was "doll."

Helen Keller was the first person who was deaf/blind to graduate with a Bachelor degree.



meet
SUDHANSHU CHAVDA

Age 30 years

Person with Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Instructor at ITI, Gujarat; BCA, MCA
Indira Gandhi National University,
Bhavnagar; Lok Vidyalaya

Supported by: PNR Bhavnagar

“Sudhanshu’s story proves that if one puts his mind to a goal, one can overcome any challenge and absolutely nothing can stop him from realising his dream.

Sudhanshu’s story proves that if one puts his mind to a goal, one can overcome any challenge and absolutely nothing can stop him from realising his dream.

Regular therapy at the local treatment centre for children with CP gradually helped Sudhanshu improve and overcome his physical, mental and intellectual developmental challenges.



Alongside his therapy, Sudhanshu had also received basic pre-primary education, and he was academically advanced enough – as all his doctors and therapists agreed – to begin his formal education. But Sudhanshu’s unclear speech and fumbled walk due to underdeveloped limbs made schools refuse admission.

Sudhanshu’s parents were teachers at a government school that accepted him and thus Sudhanshu’s journey in inclusive education began. It was a constant struggle, Sudhanshu said. He had to not only manage his extensive studies, but also juggle a strenuous schedule of special educational, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

A key challenge Sudhanshu faced was finding writers for exams. Many quit abruptly, leaving him in a lurch and affecting his academic performance. As he progressed to higher standards, the process only became more taxing. Nevertheless, Sudhanshu persevered. He completed his primary and secondary education from the school his mother was a teacher for and higher secondary education from the institution his father taught at.

The constant presence of his parents at school helped him adjust and he quickly made friends with his peers too. “All the teachers were really supportive,” Sudhanshu added, “and they made every effort to accommodate my needs and help me whenever I needed it.”

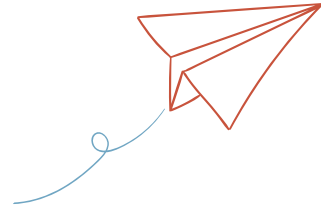
Sudhanshu’s hard-work, determination and sheer academic abilities ultimately helped him succeed. He sailed through school, clearing his 10th and 12th board exams in his first attempt. He was active in school, even participating in a government-organised ‘Run for Unity’ event in 2013. He also achieved a place for further studies in Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA) and subsequently, Master of Computer Applications (MCA) programs, even receiving a merit-based fee waiver for one year.

“The biggest challenge I faced was when I applied for the post of Instructor at ITI, Gujarat. I had a good interview and was even selected for the position, but later denied the job because of my speech problems,” Sudhanshu said.

He did not give up, however, but took his complaints to the highest authorities – in this case, the Commissioner for Persons With Disabilities. The rejection was over-turned and for the past four years, Sudhanshu is happily serving in that capacity. Inclusive education made Sudhanshu confident and gave him the ability and strength to fight for his rights.



meet TANVI NAI



Age 14 years

Child with Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Class 4
Urmi School, Vadodara

Supported by: Seher, Ek Udaan

Tanvi Nai is a child with diplegic Cerebral Palsy. This meant that she could not sit up, let alone walk unassisted. But just last year, Tanvi performed a dance at her mainstream school's Annual Function.



Born prematurely, Tanvi was diagnosed with diplegic CP at the age of 1, when her parents realised that she wasn't able to sit up.

"It was a struggle," Tanvi's mother, Maya, says. *"A majority of my day was spent with Tanvi."* Every day for the next few years, Maya took her daughter for three hours of vigorous physiotherapy every day. Because they lived quite a distance from the hospital and the support Centre, travelling involved walking, taking a rickshaw, and a bus - all while physically carrying Tanvi in her arms. It was utterly exhausting. And her day didn't end there. She spent another couple of hours every morning and evening working with Tanvi on her exercises.

It was a lot of back-breaking hard work for not just Tanvi, but her parents as well. And it has all paid off in spades! Tanvi and Maya were all smiles as they spoke about Tanvi's improvement. She can function independently at home now - bathing, dressing herself, going to the washroom, and eating. She can walk and climb the stairs all by herself too - a true achievement!

Life with CP can be frustrating, but this hasn't discouraged Tanvi one bit. She was late to school, being admitted to 1st standard at age 9. *"But Tanvi is a super talkative child,"* her mother says. *"She never had any trouble making friends."*

Tanvi loves school. She enjoys her friends and regularly goes out to play with them. She is a good student too - her favourite subject is English, but she is generally proficient with languages.

Nevertheless, it has not been a straightforward journey. Although she was enrolled in English medium stream, she has now shifted to Gujarati because her parents believe Tanvi will learn better in her mother tongue.

Tanvi is a quick learner and confident with reading, but she continues to face issues with her writing pace. With a large class, teachers cannot accommodate her, so she often has to put in extra work to cover what she missed at home.

But she manages: *"Mummy helps me study a little bit, but mostly I study and do my homework on my own,"* Tanvi says proudly.

Maya has made it a point to make sure Tanvi is included in all activities conducted by her school, even over the school's doubts. But, Tanvi defied all those who doubted her and put on a beautiful dance performance (in a wheelchair) with her classmates in front of a large audience. Maya wants to ingrain this takeaway in Tanvi's mind - that she can do anything her heart desires. All she now has to do is reach for the stars.



meet
YASH SHRIKANT SHARDUL

Age 12 years

Child with visual impairment

Class 7
Baroda High School, Vadodara

Supported by: Consortium for
Inclusive Education and Samaj
Suraksha Sankul

Yash was three years old when he started when he started experiencing black-outs. By the time he was in nursery, he had lost 80% of his vision. For Yash and his family, the world had turned upside down. They visited several doctors and specialists and tried to diagnose his condition.



It was an extremely stressful and difficult situation - not just for the young boy who had suddenly lost his eyesight, but also for his family who were struggling to come to terms with their child's condition and worrying over what his life might look like.

Even though he was very little, Yash was sensitive to the fact that his visual impairment was taxing his parents' relationship. "My parents always tried to protect me, but I know their marriage was in trouble because of my condition," Yash said.

To add to their problems, Yash's school in Nasik (his hometown) refused to let him continue studying at the institution, insisting that he had to be enrolled at a school for special needs children.

At his grandparents' suggestion, Yash's family moved to Vadodara in order to continue Yash's education and enrolled him at Deepak Foundation's Samaj Suraksha Sankul, an educational institution for the visually impaired. He felt more socially accepted here than anywhere else before, as he learnt how to cope with his condition.

Gradually, the Consortium for Inclusive Education encouraged and facilitated his enrolment in a mainstream school in Vadodara - Baroda High School (Danteshwar). For a child who had been through so much, leaving behind the safe, secure and familiar environment of the special school was nothing short of nerve-racking.

Although he may have been apprehensive at first, Yash believes that the move was a life-changing experience for him. His venture into an entirely new environment gave him confidence and taught him to be more independent. He became more outgoing socially and learnt to make friends with all kinds of children, not just differently-abled ones.

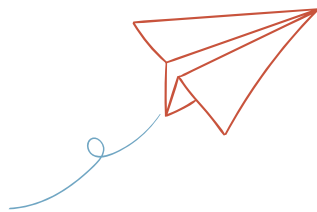
Yash is filled with positivity and the unshakeable belief that he can overcome any challenge he may be faced with, no matter how difficult. He is proud of himself and self-assured in his abilities; he has proven to himself that despite his visual impairment, he cannot just compete with, but outperform his non-disabled equals.

Today, Yash thrives amongst his sighted peers. He studies and sits for his exams independently using technology. Most importantly, he can now dream of a future bursting with possibilities.

"I made friends, became independent and for the first time I ventured out in the world all by myself... Social inclusion has given me the greatest gift of all- the ability to dream."



meet
ZEEL RATHOD



Age 6 years

Child with physical disability

Class 1
Baroda High School, Vadodara

Supported by: Deepak Foundation
and Consortium for Inclusive
Education

At 6 months, Zeel Rathod fell gravely ill. Her father, Pritish, says they were quite desperate: Zeel was admitted to a hospital with a persisting high fever. They consulted multiple doctors before a treatment finally showed results and Zeel's fever broke.

Pritish thought the worst was behind them. But his brief reprieve was over when he realized that, even at the age of 1, Zeel could not sit up on her own, let alone walk. Unbeknownst to the family, the fever had a lasting impact on Zeel's back and legs, leaving her physically impaired.



That is when the struggle truly began, Pritish says. It took two full years of daily physiotherapy at the Kashibhai Hospital in Vadodara before Zeel could even sit up straight. And every single day was a gruelling test of strength. "We are not well-off financially; so we had to get subsidised treatment. But even getting a disability certificate and now, a UDID card, was a relentless struggle," Pritish elaborates. They had to face an endless cycle of red tape, going from one doctor and official to another. At one point, they even had to take Zeel - who was only 3 at the time - for an IQ test as the hospital refused to hand over a disability certificate without it.

Apart from therapy, Zeel also needed an exceedingly expensive botox treatment - which Pritish couldn't afford at the time. The only earning member of his family, Pritish couldn't be there for his daughter while working long hours. So, he had no choice but to quit. He now works flexible hours as a freelance photographer, so that he can spend time working with Zeel. It took almost 3 years of saving every spare penny, but Zeel finally got the treatment last year.

And it had worked wonders too! Zeel has shown marked improvement: she beamed with pride as she demonstrated walking down the street without any support. "I even climb the stairs to go see my grandparents completely on my own - sometimes twice a day!" Zeel added confidently.

Zeel's physical impairment has not stopped her from enjoying an education. She goes to a play school in her neighbourhood, where she is on par with her peers. She has mastered the alphabet and delights in learning about animals.

Zeel's journey in inclusive education is only just beginning. She faced multiple rejections from mainstream schools, with most citing excuses like the campus does not have accessible infrastructure and others asking for substantial "donations" in exchange for admission.

But the family is hopeful: Pritish knows that Zeel is a bright girl. One only has to look at her to tell that the little girl is brimming with potential. Under Right To Education Act, she has secured Admission in Baroda High School, Danteshwar in Class 1. We wish Zeel the best of luck and eagerly hope to follow her journey as she blossoms into a confident and successful young woman!



Until you have a kid with special needs you have no idea of the depth of your strength, tenacity and resourcefulness.

ANONYMOUS



THE EXPERIENCE

We wish to bring about awareness, train all partners in dealing with this situation and make education of ALL children an enriching experience.

The process of connecting with these children and listening to the child and/or the parents was a moving experience for us. The objective of bringing forth this book is to enable parents/families, school managements, and teachers to believe that including ALL children into neighbourhood schools is a best practice that will enable teachers and schools to push their boundaries in terms of teaching methods.

However, 'pseudo inclusion' is a real concern, where CwDs are enrolled in mainstream schools, but the experience is not beneficial for them.

In order to achieve real inclusion, organisations need to implement inclusive curriculum, classroom accommodation, strong parental involvement, accessibility measures.

NGOs and specialised organisations also play a critical role in imparting regular trainings to parents, school managements and teachers on inclusive practices.

This collection of 'success stories' brings forth the emotions parents go through, feel the challenges faced by them as care givers, looking for the right doctor, the right intervention and later for the right school for their child.

Consortium for Inclusive Education is the torch bearer for equitable education and works in partnership with the parents, children with disability, managements of schools, teachers and special educators, counsellors and coordinators of schools.

CONSORTIUM FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Consortium for Inclusive Education is our systems based approach designed to enable all institutions to address the needs of children with special needs. Deepak Foundation, with the support of Gujarat CSR Authority, is establishing a national level “Consortium for Inclusive Education”. The Consortium has a broad mission of supporting regular schools in integrating children with special needs and ensuring that they continue to receive high quality education post-integration. The Consortium is meant to be an interactive platform for a group of experts from civil society organisations, academia, corporates, and government representatives. Department of Social Justice and Empowerment and Department of People with Disabilities, Gujarat are also active stakeholders in this initiative.

Inclusive education is the first step towards achieving social and economic rehabilitation of people with disabilities and thereby completely integrating them into the society. The PWD Act requires the Central, State, and Union Territory Governments to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to a “free and appropriate” education until the age of 18 years.

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sometimes real superheroes
live in the hearts of small
children fighting big battles.

CONSORTIUM FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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