

Disabilities Inclusive Education Systems

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Abstract: Inclusion advocates diversification of the educational provisions and personalization of common learning experiences. This is in contrast to the traditional planning of the classroom activities, which is based on the “average” student. Inclusive education is all about building a support system, infusing flexibility in all dimensions of the schooling system, and its practices, so that needs of all stakeholders, are met. A GP is a practice that has been field-tested and has produced good results, and therefore recommended as a model. The states and UT’s, across India, were adopting practices and strategies, as per the local context and needs, for implementing inclusive education, under SSA, and RMSA. Some of these locally adapted and innovated practices had the potential for adaptation and adoption by other states and UT’s struggling to find solutions for similar problems and challenges.

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Introduction:

“Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures which exist in our societies. It is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone. Inclusion is about creating a better world for everyone” Diane Richler [1] Education, a fundamental right, in the Constitution of India is also essential for recognition as a useful productive member of one's community and for participation in the community life in a meaningful way [2]. In the rapidly changing time, such as the present, one of the major aims of education is to address individual needs of all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Inclusion advocates diversification of the educational provisions and personalization of common learning experiences [3, 4]. When done appropriately this facilitates the highest degree of participation of all students, irrespective of origin and degree of abilities and disabilities. This also implies movement towards the Universal Design of Learning (UDL). Principals of UDL, suggests that diversity in the needs of all learners is to be addressed from the beginning of the teaching-learning process, [5]. This is in contrast to the traditional planning of the classroom activities, which is based on the “average” student [6]. In other words, in traditional planning of teaching the activities are initially designed for ‘average’. Afterward, appropriate individualized interventions are made to address the needs of specific students, left out of the original plan of activities which was prepared by the logic of homogeneity instead of diversity. This brings ‘inclusion’ in the forefront. Inclusion in education implies that it is the responsibility of the society to

change the environment so that the children with disabilities and disadvantages feel empowered to take part, on an equal basis, in the education system. Inclusion is concerned with the extent to which ‘socially just’, educational policy; pedagogy and teaching practice are being followed in schools and colleges [7]. In 2008, International Conference on Education, with the agenda of “Defining Inclusive Education” was organized by IBE, UNESCO [8]. The delegates of the conference reached the conclusion that diversity discourse is neither about students with disabilities or other special needs due to being immigrants or gifted nor it is about supporting teachers to carry out inclusive pedagogy practices. Inclusive education is all about building support system, infusing flexibility in all dimension of the schooling system and its practices, so that needs of all stakeholders, are met.

Understanding Good and Innovative Practices

According to Webster Dictionary Good Practice (GP) is “wise thing to do” [9]. A GP is a practice that has been field tested, proven to work well and yielded good results, and so recommended as a model [10]. In laymen’s words it is a repeated successful experience, which deserves to be shared for the benefit of masses. The term GP is often used in the fields of health care, government administration, education system, project management, product development, and so on. The word “innovation” is commonly associated with experiment, flexibility and fluidity, whereas word “good” often indicates contentment, context appropriateness and reliability. Both good practices and innovative practices encourage collaboration with relevant people, stakeholders and organisations. Both good practices

and innovative practices complement each other. Just as a good practice can be an innovative practice; an innovative practice can most certainly be good practice. However, there is a need to establish balance between the both.

GP in the context of Inclusive Education

Inclusion in education has been in practice in India for more than a decade. Initially, through inclusive education component under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) [11] and later, under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyaan (RMSA) [12], and currently it is an integral part of Samagra Shiksha [13]. The provisions for CWSN under Samagra Shiksha include, identification and assessment of children with disabilities, aids, appliances, medical services, diagnostic services, appropriate teaching learning material, transport and escort facilities, hostel, scholarships, support staff, large print textbooks, Braille books, uniform allowance, stipend for girl, use of ICT and awareness camps.

Status of education among disabled children in India

A study by the World Bank (2007), based on NSS data, noted that children with disabilities are five times more likely to be out of school than children belonging to scheduled castes or scheduled tribes (SC or ST). Furthermore, when children with disabilities do attend school, they rarely progress beyond the primary level, resulting in lower employment opportunities and long-term income poverty. Even in states with high overall enrollment and good educational indicators, a significant proportion of out-of-school children are disabled: in Kerala, the figure is 27 percent, and in Tamil Nadu, it is more than 33 percent. Data also indicates that across all levels of severity, children with disabilities very rarely progress beyond primary school.

The 2019 "State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities" considered the 2011 census, which indicated that there are 78,64,636 disabled children in India, constituting 1.7 percent of the total child population. Three-fourths of children with disabilities under the age of five and one-fourth between the ages of five and 19 do not attend any educational institution. The report noted that only 61 percent of children with disabilities (CWDs) aged 5 to 19 were enrolled in school, compared to 71 percent overall when all children are included. Moreover, 12% of children with disabilities have dropped out of school, and 27% have never attended any educational institution. According to the report, a large number of disabled children do not attend regular schools but instead opt for the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). A review of NIOS enrollment figures also shows a drop in most categories of disabilities between 2009 and 2015.

The Unified District Information on School Education (UDISE) + data for 2018-19 also presents a grim picture. It highlights a persistent and almost static enrolment of children with disabilities over the years. In 2013-14, the enrollment of disabled children in school education was 1.1% of the total number of students enrolled. This figure declined to 0.9% in 2018-19. Gender disparity in the enrolment of girls with disabilities also persists.

According to the AISHE report of 2020, the estimated state-wise total enrollment in higher education is 38.5 million, of which 92,831 PwD students were enrolled, as compared to 85,877 in 2019. Among these, 47,830 are male, and 45,001 are female students. When we compare this number with other disadvantaged groups, it is the least among all, clearly indicating that a very small number of these individuals pursue higher education. The table below illustrates the social group-wise distribution of PwD students.

Roadblocks to Education

The plight of disabled children is rooted in their inability to manipulate personal and environmental variables, thereby restricting the performance of daily tasks and disrupting established role patterns and social role expectations. The most significant roadblock for PwD students in education, particularly higher education, is the lack of awareness of government-run programs. This is evident in the 2011 census data, which shows that in rural areas, 49% of the disabled population is literate, while in urban areas, the percentage of literate individuals among the disabled population is 67%.

In the village surveys conducted by the World Bank in UP and TN, the team noted that 72.3 percent of households with disabilities were not aware of schemes for free aids and appliances. Instead, it is observed that "while assistive technologies are a right under the SSA, they are, in practice, rationed, making them a privilege." It is evident that the benefit of the reservation made for PwD students is often violated, as even a person with a minute disability can obtain a disabled certificate and misuse it. In this way, many people are prevented from taking advantage of it due to a lack of awareness or not knowing the proper channel through which they can obtain this certificate.

A child's access to preschool and primary education is most likely to be hampered by the lack of disabled-friendly institutions. According to members of the NCPEDP, less than 1% of the country's total number of educational institutions are disabled-friendly. Many buildings are old, so the new norms don't apply to them, making them fail to meet disabled-friendly standards. Children with autism and cerebral palsy, as well as disabled girls, are the least likely to

be enrolled in school. Less than 40% of school buildings have ramps, and approximately 17% have accessible restrooms.

In the AISHE (2020) report, only ramps and separate toilets for females are surveyed, although that is not the only criteria to make the HEI accessible for PwD students. There should also be a survey conducted on the availability of lifts, elevators, inclusive toilets, restrooms, and hostel facilities for PwD students in all the HEI, as a person with a locomotor disability may need these amenities. Additionally, there is a shortage of trained special educators in mainstream schools.

The issue is further exacerbated by the attitude of other children, often manifesting as teasing and exclusion by peers. According to the UNESCO report, besides physical infrastructure, processes in the school, and essential resources like assistive and ICT technology and devices, the attitude of parents and teachers towards including children with disabilities in mainstream education is also crucial to achieving the objective of inclusive education. Most PwD students reside in rural areas where social stigma persists, with the belief that obtaining an education won't necessarily benefit them in overcoming employment challenges. In rural India, it is observed that people, especially women, due to societal stigma, avoid disclosing the truth about disability. Mehrotra (2004) noted that rural women with disabilities may be the most likely to be overlooked.

A part of the problem also lies in the lack of inclusive policies. Existing laws governing education for people with disabilities are ambiguous. According to the 2016 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, educational institutions must "provide reasonable accommodation according to the individual's requirements and provide the necessary support, individualized or otherwise, in environments that maximize academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion." However, according to the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy review published in May 2020, the terms "reasonable accommodation," "individualized support," and "full inclusion" have not been defined, leaving room for arbitrary implementation.

Recommendations

Measures are required to ensure quality education for every child to meet the goals and targets of Agenda 2030, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 4. Disabled-friendly infrastructure, such as ramps, lifts, elevators, inclusive toilets, and hostel facilities, should be the government of India's priority. Most PwD individuals live in rural areas, for whom a proper awareness program concerning opportunities, employability, scholarship schemes, disabled

certificates, and various other important matters should be organized. These programs can address doubts and social stigma effectively.

Various national portals can be useful for PwD students, such as www.swavlambancard.gov.in for unique ID cards, disabilityaairs.gov.in for various schemes, disabled certificate forms, and scholarship-related information (www.nhfdc.nic.in, www.india.gov.in, thenationaltrust.gov.in, etc.). These topics should be discussed in orientation programs to guide students on how to use these resources. Moreover, every educational institution should have an accessible support centre for PwD students. The implementation and regular follow-up of programs should be monitored.

The government should also focus on curriculum transformation and adopting teaching practices to aid the inclusion of diverse learners. Additionally, it should establish a coordinating mechanism under the HRD Ministry for the effective convergence of all education programs for children with disabilities. Ensuring specific and adequate financial allocation in education budgets to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities is crucial.

One of the main challenges is the unavailability of reliable data, as many relevant global and national indicators need to be disaggregated by disability status. The lack of research that compares the outcomes of education for people with disabilities navigating different education systems – mainstream, special, and home schools – continues to be a hurdle in designing inclusive policies. As the government invests significant amounts of money into disabled-friendly infrastructure, research must be conducted to establish the effectiveness of these efforts.

India needs to prioritize the adoption of standard criteria in data collection. To ensure inclusive societies, concrete action is required to make persons with disabilities and their situations visible in policymaking. Robust data and analysis are required to ensure that persons with disabilities occupy their rightful place in the SDG framework and its implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Conclusion

The participation of disabled children in education is meagre. A gap remains in the enrollment and retention of disabled children in education despite government schemes and programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Integrated Education for Disabled Children, Right to Education (RTE) Act, and Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act. Major roadblocks to education include a rigid curriculum, inaccessible infrastructure, the absence of modified assessments, lack of awareness, and social stigma. Part of the problem also stems from the

unavailability of reliable data required to design inclusive policies.

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