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A solution-based review paper on special needs/special education for schools in India

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Abstract

Education is a powerful instrument of social change, and often initiates upward movement in the social structure. In the 1970s, the government launched the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC, 1974). The scheme aimed at providing educational opportunities to learners with disabilities in regular schools, and to facilitate their achievement and retention. A cardinal feature of the scheme was the liaison between regular and special schools to reinforce the integration process. The enrolment ratio per 1000 disabled persons between the ages of 5 to 18 years in ordinary schools is higher in the rural areas (475) than it is in the urban areas (444), (National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 2002). The Office of the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities (NHRC, 2021) stated that not more than 4% of children with disabilities have access to education. A discussion on what can we do to help these children throws some light on some helpful factors. All students would gain if this led to smaller classes and better instruction. To ensure inclusiveness, all programs - regardless of level of education - must make appropriate teacher preparation, awareness of and attitudes towards disabilities, retention of exceptional children, etc. mandatory. For inclusive education programmes to be successful, the problems discussed need to be addressed. It is only by listening, observation, and clear action to resolve these challenges that we can move forward in truly achieving the inclusion of all learners, particularly those with disabilities.

Keywords: India; Schools; Special Needs/Special Education; Inclusive Education Programme; Awareness and Attitude towards Disabilities; Finding Solutions.

1. Introduction

Education is a powerful instrument of social change, and often initiates upward movement in the social structure. Thereby, helping to bridge the gap between the different sections of society. The educational scene in the country has undergone major change over the years, resulting in better provision of education and better educational practices. In 1944, the Central Advisory Board of Education published a comprehensive report called the Sergeant Report on the post-war educational development of the country. As per the report, provisions for the education of the handicapped (Alur, M. 2002), were to form an essential part of the national system of education, which was to be administered by the Education Department. According to this report, handicapped children were to be sent to special schools only when the nature and extent of their defects made this necessary.

The Kothari Commission (1964-66), the first education commission of independent India, observed: “the education of handicapped children should be an inseparable part of the education system.” The commission recommended experimentation with integrated programmes in order to bring as many children as possible into these programmes (Alur, 2002). The government’s agenda to universalise elementary education, and its commitment to the Directive Principles of the Constitution, are guided by the recognition that a new universal system of education should be based on equity, the redressal of past imbalances, and the provision of access to quality education, especially for marginalised groups.

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Recent educational developments and the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Constitutional Amendments outline the possibility of entrusting basic education to the local elected bodies in towns and villages. This would allow for community participation in education at the elementary level and would introduce radical change, leading to the empowerment of learners with Special Educational Needs. Until the 1970s, the policy encouraged segregation. Most educators believed that children with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities were so different that they could not participate in the activities of a common school (Advani, 2002).

Christian missionaries, in the 1880s, started schools for the disabled as charitable undertakings (Mehta, 1982). The first school for the blind was established in 1887. An institute for the deaf and mute, was set up in 1888. Services for the physically disabled were also initiated in the middle of the twentieth century. Individuals with mental retardation were the last to receive attention. The first school for the mentally challenged being established in 1934 (Mishra, 2000). Special education programmes in earlier times were, therefore, heavily dependent on voluntary initiatives. The government's (Department of Education) initiatives after independence were manifested in the establishment of a few workshop units meant primarily for blind adults (Luthra, 1974). These units later included people who were deaf, physically impaired, and mentally retarded (Rohindekar and Usha, 1988). While some provisions existed in the States, it was considered the best course to assist and encourage voluntary organisations already working in the field (See First Five-Year Plan, 1951-1956).

The welfare approach continued in government programmes. Support was provided to voluntary organisations for the establishment of model schools for the blind, the deaf, and the mentally retarded. The government set up the National Library for the Blind, the Central Braille Press, and employment exchanges for the disabled. It also made provisions for scholarships, for prevention and early identification of disabling conditions, for the development of functional skills, and for aids and appliances for the disabled.

2. Educational provisions for children with special needs - integrated education

In the 1970s, the government launched the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC, 1974). The scheme aimed at providing educational opportunities to learners with disabilities in regular schools, and to facilitate their achievement and retention. The objective was to integrate children with disabilities in the general community at all levels as equal partners to prepare them for normal development and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence. A cardinal feature of the scheme was the liaison between regular and special schools to reinforce the integration process.

In the meantime, the National Council of Educational Research and Training joined hands with UNICEF and launched Project Integrated Education for Disabled Children (PIED) in the year 1987, to strengthen the integration of learners with disabilities into regular schools. An external evaluation of this project in 1994 showed that not only did the enrolment of learners with disabilities increase considerably, but the retention rate among disabled children was also much higher than the other children in the same blocks. In 1997 IEDC was amalgamated with other major basic education projects like the District Primary Education Programme (Chadha, 2002) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Department of Elementary Education, 2000).

The IEDC scheme provides for a wide range of incentives and interventions for the education of children with disabilities. These include preschool training, counselling for parents, allowances for books and stationery, uniforms, transport, readers and escorts, hostel facilities, and other assistive devices. The scheme provides one special teacher for every eight children with disabilities, community involvement, and a resource room in a cluster of eight to ten schools. Several voluntary organisations are implementing the scheme in various States.

Until 1998, integrated education was provided to 8,90,000 learners in different States till the senior secondary level (NCERT, 1998). By the year 2002, the scheme had extended to 41,875 schools, benefitting more than 1,33,000 disabled children in 27 States and four Union Territories (Department of Education, MHRD, 2003). The total number of learners with SEN enrolled in regular schools under DPEP was more than 5,60,000: this represents almost 70% of the nearly 8,10,000 learners with SEN identified under this programme (DPEP, 2003).

The enrolment ratio per 1000 disabled persons between the ages of 5 to 18 years in ordinary schools is higher in the rural areas (475) than it is in the urban areas (444), (National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 2002). The Office of the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities (NHRC, 2021) stated that not more than 4% of children with disabilities have access to education. Whatever may be the case, the enactment of legislations by the State Governments has helped in facilitating access to education for all learners with SEN by introducing various entitlements like reservations, scholarships, allowances, etc. By promulgating the equal rights of learners with SEN, these Acts have

significantly impacted the educational policies both at the Central and State levels, but the effect has been marginal. About 11% of disabled persons between the ages of 5–18 years were enrolled in special schools in the urban areas as compared to less than 1% in the rural areas (NSSO, 2002). This clearly indicates that the presence of special schools in a parallel stream does affect the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools. Criticising the segregation policies of the Indian government, Baquer and Sharma (1997) have pointed out that: ...separate special education systems lead to social segregation and isolation of the disabled, thus creating separate worlds for them in adult life. Inclusive education has the potential to lay the foundation of a more inclusive society where being “different” is accepted, respected, and valued. The school is the first opportunity to start this desirable and yet difficult process. It is difficult because it is wrought with fears and apprehensions on the part of parents, teachers, and other children. Despite the efforts of governmental and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), there is still a significant need to facilitate access of disabled children to educational institutions and to education in general.

The first and foremost strategy for any country, and especially India, must be therefore to increase the access to education for learners with SEN. Though awareness is being created by the inclusion of learners with SEN in major educational programmes like the DPEP and now the SSA, most of them address SEN as a segregated issue rather than as one that runs through all initiatives.

Though the integration of children with SEN has gathered momentum in the country since 1974, there are other possibilities for these children to gain an education. For example, the National Institute of Open Schooling offers courses that have the advantage of being specially adapted to the needs of every child as well as giving the child every opportunity to progress at his/her own pace. Another example is Alternative Schooling (Advani, 2002) and community-based rehabilitation programmes. It is believed that the fundamental right to education will bring more students with SEN into ordinary schools, which will in turn provide an impetus for change and bring about a number of innovations in the field of SNE.

Key features of inclusive education in India include

- **Diversity and Equality:** Inclusive education recognizes and celebrates the diversity of students, acknowledging that every learner is unique. There is an emphasis on equal opportunities for education, ensuring that no student is excluded based on factors such as disability, gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural background.
- **Accessible Infrastructure and Resources:** Inclusive schools are designed to be physically accessible to all students. This includes infrastructure modifications such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Additionally, educational resources, including teaching materials and technologies, are adapted to meet the diverse needs of students.
- **Individualized Support:** Inclusive education promotes a student-centric approach, recognizing that individuals have different learning styles, paces, and needs. Teachers are encouraged to provide individualized support and accommodations to help each student succeed.
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** In order to effectively implement inclusive education, teachers undergo training to enhance their understanding of diverse learning needs and teaching strategies. Professional development programs focus on equipping educators with the skills to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.
- **Collaboration and Community Engagement:** Inclusive education involves collaboration among educators, parents, support staff, and the community at large. Building partnerships with stakeholders helps create a holistic support system for students, fostering an inclusive atmosphere both inside and outside the classroom.
- **Curricular Adaptations:** Inclusive education calls for flexible and adaptable curricula that can be modified to suit the needs of diverse learners. This may include differentiated instruction, use of assistive technologies, and varied assessment methods.
- **Awareness and Sensitization:** Promoting awareness and sensitization about diversity and inclusion is a crucial aspect of inclusive education. This involves fostering a positive attitude toward differences and challenging stereotypes and prejudices.

Even though India has made progress in supporting inclusive education, there are still issues to be addressed, including poor infrastructure, a lack of qualified teachers, and negative social perceptions of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, continuous attempts are being made to deal with these problems and to develop a more inclusive educational environment across the nation. Despite the promotion of inclusive education, government documents focus on inclusive education as being about including children with disabilities in the education system, but not specifically the mainstream. However, inclusion in the education system is not the same as inclusion in the mainstream.

It is, however, arguable that special education is in fact regarded as superior in India due to its preferred status and that it is inclusion in the mainstream that is currently seen as the resource - constrained inferior alternative. The education paves foundation for the growth and development of the children. The children with special needs skip milestones of development due to their disabilities and miss out important experiences thus developing secondary handicaps.

3. Discussion

3.1. Ideal Scenario that would help:

Koblin, J (2021) suggested that Feuerstein believed that anyone could increase their ability to learn using human mediation. He distinguished between direct and indirect learning and what that meant for the learner's ability to understand new information. After careful observation, he developed his method of dynamic assessments and cognitive intervention. However, there is neither a collective effort to bring this about, nor are there legal provisions to facilitate inclusivity for children with special needs. A lack of skilled teachers further precipitates the problem.

The Finnish model of education, on the other hand, demonstrates with great success how to be inclusive and empathetic by including differently abled students in the mainstream. In small teaching groups, children with special needs are given personal guidance and there is a close-knit collaboration between special educators, education assistants, and classroom teachers. They provide maximum help to the child at an early age, so the magnitude of their disabilities does not increase as they grow. Only, if the odds are insurmountable, do parents opt for special schools.

Schools could be inspired by this model and adopt some of its practices. Teacher training programs could include techniques to interact with disabled students, and the cultivation of a non-discriminatory mindset so that a healthy and inclusive environment can be created in the classrooms... thereby trying not to consider any student as a 'problem' child.

Specially trained teachers could support and encourage these students through modules designed to help in their integrated development. Extracurricular activities, remedial sessions, practical lessons, personal engagement, playtime, and flexible responsive teaching could be used to encourage every single child in the classroom to be more independent and to discover the leader within.

A comprehensive support system is a must for children with special needs and educators and teachers must work together to address any issue that may arise. Regular open house sessions can go a long way in sensitising students and teachers to the usage of correct language and behaviour around a child with special needs. Encouraging every child to take part in school functions and competitions is important to ensure that no one feels left out.

As the British Physicist and one of the longest survivors of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), Stephen Hawkins (2011) said, "Concentrate on things your disability does not prevent you from doing well, and do not regret the things it interferes with. Do not be disabled in spirit, as well as physically." Educators also need to know that a child is not defined by his or her disability.

It would be good if the government could bring in a comprehensive policy on inclusive education and more teachers could be trained to recognise and address learning disabilities. States like Andhra Pradesh have taken steps towards sanctioning residential bridge course schools and other states could follow suit. In simple terms, a bridge course is a short-term programme designed to help students transition from one level of education to another, or from one stream of study to another. We need to be working proactively to achieve the UN's Sustainable Goal for Development which is about inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all, including persons with disabilities.

3.2. Problems of Inclusive Education in India

The Indian government considers inclusive education to be compulsory and essential. However, when it comes to inclusive education, there are significant differences in national practices and policies. A number of challenges prevent the appropriate implementation of inclusive education in our nation. The following are among the problems of inclusive education based on literature and experience:

- **Skills of teachers:** Teachers are the primary people in the successful implementation of inclusive education, but they lack certain competencies. Teachers must possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and educational background in order to carry out the duties given to them, yet they are lacking in these areas.

- **Attitudes towards inclusion and disability among teachers, administrators, parents, peers and policy planners:** Teachers, parents, peers, administrators, and policy planners must all have positive opinions towards inclusion and disability in addition to many additional requirements in order to successfully implement inclusive education. But in many cases, these continue to hold negative opinions. This is negatively impacting India's inclusive education structure.
- **Lack of awareness about children with disabilities among general teachers:** At all levels, regular teachers are ignorant of the fundamentals of working with children who have difficulties. Despite their lack of scientific and educational understanding, they have their own socially and culturally constructed ideas regarding some obvious disabilities, such as classification, labelling, special needs, and adaptations.
- **Rigid Curriculum:** Rigid curriculum restricts special education children from studying on par with general education pupils. There is no specific curriculum in place to meet the wide range of demands of exceptional pupils. Curriculum adjustments made to meet the individual requirements of each learner, including students with disabilities, are essential for implementing inclusive education. The curriculum needs to be appropriately created and should include ideas such as "Universal Instructional Design."
- **School environment including difficulties in physical access:** For inclusive education to be genuinely practiced in schools, adjustments must be made. Nevertheless, the majority of schools do not offer these accommodations. Schools typically lack amenities like lifts, ramps, and navigational signs, among others. One of the main things preventing us from achieving the goal of inclusive education is the absence of infrastructure in our institution.
- **Family collaboration:** Considering the unique features of Indian society and culture, it is realistic to say that families play a critical role in ensuring inclusive education in India. In India, families have been considered to be the only ones responsible for their offspring. Therefore, encouraging and including family in the process is the only way to truly achieve inclusion.
- **Insufficient and improper pre-service teacher education:** One of the biggest problems with inclusive education is that mainstream teachers, at all levels, do not receive enough training or professional development.
- **Negative self-perceptions of children with disabilities:** Negative self-perceptions of children with impairments present a significant difficulty for inclusive education practices. The opinions of peers, instructors, and neighbours frequently reinforce these unfavourable impressions. For such children to be truly included, these negative self-perceptions must be eradicated.
- **Information and Communication Technology (ICT) availability and related competencies:** Information and communication technology (ICT) is the age we live in today. Nearly every endeavour in human existence, including education and training, is greatly facilitated by ICT. Many assistive and pedagogical ICT-enabled tools are available that are especially helpful for kids with impairments. Using them will facilitate and accelerate inclusive education. All parties involved should have access to these and learn the necessary competencies to use them.
- **Improper policy planning and lack-lustre implementation:** The Indian government asserts that inclusive education has been implemented everywhere and at all levels. Nevertheless, inadequate policy planning has resulted in a lack of established measures to evaluate the extent of implementation. Moreover, the enforcement and assurance of inclusive education implementation in the private sector have been inadequate.
- **Expenses involved:** The implementation of inclusive education at all levels is going to cost a lot of money, specifically for a large and diverse country like India. The administration doesn't appear eager to spend this large sum of money. The government's concerns are justified considering that we are a country that is still developing.

4. A solution-based perspective on the current scenario

India joined 135 countries to make education a fundamental right of every child (UNESCO, 2010) when it passed the Right to Education Act 2009 (Government of India, 2009). Likewise, the 2016 Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act (Government of India, 2016b) aims to provide access to education for all children with disability. These acts support UNESCO's promotion of every child, including those with a disability, having access to free elementary education (UNESCO, 2017). UNESCO insists on the obligation of the government to require compulsory admission, attendance, and completion of elementary education for every child aged six to fourteen years.

Many children have trouble reading, writing, or performing other learning-related tasks at some point. This does not mean they have learning disabilities. A child with a learning disability often has several related signs, and they do not go away or get better over time. The signs of learning disabilities vary from person to person ("Courtesy: Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.", - NICHD, 2018).

Special education, also called special needs education, is the education of children who differ socially, mentally, or physically from the average to such an extent that they require modifications of usual school practices.

A child has special educational needs if they have a learning problem or disability that makes it more difficult for them to learn than most children their age. They may have problems with schoolwork, communication, or behaviour.

Common signs that a person may have learning disabilities include the following (NICHD 2018):

- Problems reading and/or writing.
- Problems with math.
- Poor memory.
- Problems paying attention.
- Trouble following directions.
- Clumsiness.
- Trouble telling time.
- Problems staying organized.
- A child with a learning disability also may have one or more of the following:
- Acting without really thinking about possible outcomes (impulsiveness).
- "Acting out" in school or social situations.
- Difficulty staying focused; being easily distracted.
- Difficulty saying a word correctly out loud or expressing thoughts.
- Problems with school performance from week to week or day to day.
- Speaking like a younger child; using short, simple phrases; or leaving out words in sentences.
- Having a hard time listening.
- Problems dealing with changes in schedule or situations.
- Problems understanding words or concepts.

4.1. What can we do to help these children?

- **Training of teachers:** For inclusive education to become a reality in India, teacher training must take priority. India's educational authorities may decide to train a single teacher from each school or group of schools. Before serving as an inclusion facilitator or integration specialist for one or more nearby schools, the teacher would need to undergo extensive training in working with a variety of disabilities. To stay current with integrated education practices, in-service teachers would also require ongoing training.
- **Teaching aids/equipment:** To assist young children in overcoming their challenges, numerous pieces of equipment are discovered every day all around the world. To aid these kids, it is important to utilize a lot of these supportive tools and apparatus. In addition to encouraging parents and teachers to use the most recent resources available, a cell will be established to distribute this information. Through the development of a cross-disciplinary approach to the problems, this envisions multi-disciplinary participation.
- **Classroom size:** Greater opportunities for inclusion arise from smaller class sizes. Government policy does not currently call for a reduction in the teacher-to-student ratio; rather, head teachers and other educators should consider making the classes in specific sections (A, B, etc.) smaller.
- **Family-school partnerships:**
 - Collaboration between general and special educators
 - Well-constructed plans that identify specific accommodations, modifications, and goals for each student.
 - Coordinated planning and communication between "general" and "special needs" staff.
 - Integrated service delivery.
 - Ongoing training and staff development.
- **Peer support:** Peer support is a bigger benefit of inclusion. Peers actively participate in the education of their classmates who have special needs. The staff needs to be supportive and encourage others. The special needs child socializes, enjoys the companionship of his classmate, and lets out his frustrations. When peers work together, physical inclusion is made possible, academic inclusion also becomes simpler because children of similar ages can more easily understand and interact with one another.
- **Need to design innovative system of training:** Many scholars have issued warnings, stating that without widespread training for normal schoolteachers, India will not be able to successfully deploy integrated educational services. Remarks regarding this circumstance are as follows: "the" vast number of people in need of training, and traditional training approaches are unable to adequately address the demands to teach

educators on a large scale, it is therefore necessary to create some creative models. One way to train so many teachers is through Distance Open Learning, or DOL (Ramanujam, 2001).

- **Need for collaboration between different ministries:** In India, several ministries oversee various programmes for people with disabilities. For instance, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is in charge of education at special schools, whereas the Ministry of Human Resource Development oversees "integrated education." This merely represents a single instance of the wastage of scarce resources. Such administrative arrangements are beyond the means of India. Administrative arrangements must be made more efficient.
- **Involve NGO's in implementing integrated education programs:** India is home to over a million NGOs (Canadian International Development Agency, 2003). Many of them continue to offer educational services to children with disabilities even though they are not all employed in the school sector. These organizations may serve both urban and rural school communities, and their widespread presence in India makes them valuable partners in the implementation of integrated education.
- **Establish an alternate system of examination:** Most Indian teachers fear that integrating children with disabilities will lead to a drop in academic standards because these pupils won't be able to pass tests (Sharma & Desai, 2002). Teachers seem to genuinely worry about this because it may affect their chances of being promoted. Therefore, it is essential to create a different kind of assessment where students with disabilities take part in tasks that highlight their strengths rather than their impairments.
- **School-university partnership:** India's multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious makeup is frequently mentioned as a barrier to any initiatives at educational reform. In order to overcome this obstacle, local universities in each of the States and Union Territories may be essential. Universities might start experimental programmes with nearby schools to investigate ways that might work for each area.
- **To promote positive experiences, teachers need to be involved in the intervention process as strategists:** In Gujarat, for instance, teacher-driven strategies in some small communities had demonstrated success in improving retention rate and school attendance of children with a disability. However, in many states in India, schoolteachers are often ill equipped, under resourced and underprepared. In a survey of 223 primary school teachers and 130 secondary school teachers in New Delhi, about 70% of regular schoolteachers indicated the lack of training in special education or experience in teaching students with a disability (Das et al., 2013). Quality training for teachers in providing inclusive education is of paramount importance.

5. Conclusion

A novel approach called inclusive education, already discussed above, aims to educate children with disabilities and learning challenges with typical students under one roof. Indian academics and thinkers have recently come to agree that inclusive education should be implemented in regular classrooms. Through mainstream education, inclusive education seeks to promote the integrated development of kids with special needs and normal children. There may be progress being made with certain government policies that prioritize teacher education. Also, teachers are not the only stakeholders involved. Students, parents, administrators, and local government officials are affected too, all of whom will see any innovation or new concept in a different light.

Another way of working this out could be to have a parallel system going in the same school wherein separate teaching and learning is going on for certain subjects, but at the same time, integration takes place for easier subjects such as art, music, games, extracurricular activities, eating meals together etc.

The whole approach is expensive and parents with children who need special education need to consider the expense factor for a school and be willing to pay that much extra for special help within the system.

A cost-effective way to support teachers in including children with a disability in their school is to use local community-based volunteers. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report, states that trained community-based assistants can provide additional support targeted at those with learning difficulties. A number of models have been cited in the literature whereby community workers are trained to work alongside teachers as community-based assistants or teachers' aides to support learners with special needs. The EFA report describes an intervention in India where Balakshi (Hindi for 'children's friends') were used to support those who were falling behind by providing in-school daily assistance. This had a significant impact on children's test scores.

We must consider the issue of normal students and their reaction to very difficult children with severe disabilities. Some of these kids are disruptive, teaching cannot carry on in the normal setting, a single teacher on her own cannot deal with

several kids with disabilities and a majority of normal children in a classroom setting. It is physically draining and emotionally challenging for any normal adult leave alone a teacher.

All students would gain if this led to smaller classes and better instruction. To ensure inclusiveness, all programs - regardless of level of education - must make appropriate teacher preparation, awareness of and attitudes towards disabilities, retention of exceptional children, etc. mandatory. For inclusive education programmes to be successful, facilities must be provided to each institution. Inclusive education is a dream... but could be worked upon to make it a reality provided all aspects of inclusion is considered. It is only by listening, observation, and clear action to resolve these challenges that we can move forward in truly achieving the inclusion of all learners, particularly those with disabilities.

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