

A PERSPECTIVE ON INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS FROM ELEMENTARY TO SECONDARY LEVEL

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Abstract

The policies of the Government of India in the last four decades opened up avenues for inclusive education, to provide education to each and every child. The present paper explains the Perspective on Inclusion of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) from Elementary to Secondary Level. With the recent change in societal attitudes leading to changing trend in education for all, a number of projects, policies and legislations have been implemented. The National Policy on Education, 1986 and the Programme of Action, 1992 gives the basic policy framework for education, emphasizing the correcting of existing inequalities. The Scheme of Integrated Education for the Disabled Children, Inclusive Education of Children & Youth with Disabilities & Sarva Siksha Abhiyan stresses CWSN should be placed in regular schools. The dramatic growth in elementary education enrolment and improvements in retention and transition rates over the past ten years, particularly among more disadvantaged groups, are increasing pressure on the secondary level to absorb new entrants. Thus Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and Inclusive Education for the Disabled at Secondary Stage scheme have been implemented. Major challenges have been also discussed which comes on the way of Inclusion of CWSN from Elementary to Secondary Level.

Inclusion of CWSN at Elementary level

Recent years have witnessed a paradigm shift in the educational practices of Children with Special Needs (CWSN). With the recent change in societal attitudes leading to changing trend in education for all, a number of projects, policies, and legislations have been implemented. The policies of the Government of India in the last four decades opened up avenues for integrated education, now referred to as inclusive education, to provide education to every child in need. Inclusive education refers all learners, young people with or without disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary pre-school provisions, schools and community educational setting with appropriate network of support services. In Inclusive education the needs of all learners are addressed so that good education can be provided to all. While in Integration learners with special needs are placed in a regular education, by comparisons seeks to adapt systems and structures to meet the needs of all learners. Moving from integration to inclusion requires adaptations at various levels including the curriculum, attitudes, values, language etc.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 and the Programme of Action, 1992 gives the basic policy framework for education, emphasizing the correcting of existing inequalities. It stresses on reducing dropout rates, improving learning achievement and expanding access to students who have not had an easy opportunity to be a part of the mainstream system. The Scheme of Integrated Education for the Disabled Children (IEDC) stresses children with disabilities are placed in a regular school without making any changes in the school to accommodate and support diverse needs. The revised Inclusive Education of Children & Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) scheme, in contrast, modify the existing physical infrastructure and teaching Methodologies to meet the needs of all children including Children with Special Needs.

The 93rd Amendment of the Constitution of India has made education a fundamental human right for children in the 6-14 years age group thereby making it mandatory for all children to be brought under the fold of education. Recognizing Education for all children as a fundamental right, this includes children with Special needs too. The key thrust of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) is to provide inclusive education to all children with and without special needs in general schools in the age group of 6-14 years. SSA ensures that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided quality inclusive education. According to Revised SSA Framework, 2011 based on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the ultimate aim is to mainstream all CWSN in their neighbourhood schools.

Rationale for Secondary Education

Demand for secondary education is soaring worldwide owing to the confluence of at least three factors (World Bank, 2005). First, as more countries achieve universal primary schooling, demand for education is moving to higher levels of the education system, and the world is witnessing an explosion of individual and family aspirations for secondary education. Second, the largest ever cohort of young people is clearly going to make a difference for the future of many countries, especially in the developing world. The way to turn what many perceive as a global risk into a global opportunity is by building and harnessing the values, attitudes, and skills of young people through quality secondary education, thus ensuring that they will become active and productive citizens of their communities. Third, economies increasingly need a more sophisticated labour force equipped with competencies, knowledge, and workplace skills that cannot be developed only in primary school or in low-quality secondary school programs. In short, provision of secondary education of good quality is seen as a crucial tool for generating the opportunities and benefits of social and economic development. For all these reasons, secondary education is a focus of increasing policy debate and analysis worldwide. This debate is framed by the need to respond to the twin challenges of increasing access to secondary education and, at the same time, improving its quality and relevance. For several decades now, most of the education reforms proposed and implemented throughout the world have focused on the compulsory and post compulsory levels of secondary education. This centrality of secondary education will persist in the foreseeable future and should certainly be reinforced.

Platform for Inclusion at secondary level

Currently educational provisions for children with special needs are covered by special schools, integrated and Inclusive schools. Over 2 lakh children with disabilities have been integrated in over 90,000 mainstream schools under the IEDC Scheme of the Ministry of HRD. The scheme of SSA has set the time bound target for achievement of UEE by 2010. As per the report to the people on education (2012) of Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India, at the elementary level through SSA programme 29.72 lakh children were identified and 24.59 lakh children were enrolled in school by September, 2010.

The Programme Evaluation Organisation (PEO), Planning Commission initiated the evaluation study of SSA to review the progress in terms of its objectives and related targets. The study covered eleven states for both rural and urban samples. Thirteen towns were canvassed for assessment of SSA interventions in urban schools in slum areas. The study has brought out certain achievements in terms of access to education. More than 98% of the sampled rural habitations have access to elementary schools within 3 Kms. While 93% of sampled slum children have access to neighbourhood schools within 1 Km. It is also worth mentioning that the numbers of unserved habitations in the sampled villages have declined across all the states. The overall, gross enrolment ratio in the sampled districts rose from 89% in 2003 to 93% in 2007. In sampled slum areas school enrolment rose by 18% during the same period. An impressive increase is also seen in the enrolment of differently abled children with their shares rising from 0.43% of the total enrolment to 1.17% in the sampled rural areas. The share of socially disadvantaged groups in school enrolment was 32% in rural and 30% in urban areas which was higher than their share in the population. Thus a positive picture has come into light by the study.

Since universalisation of elementary education has become a Constitutional mandate, it is absolutely essential to push this vision forward to move towards Universalisation of secondary education, which has already been achieved in a large number of developed countries and several developing countries. The dramatic growth in Indian elementary education enrolment and improvements in retention and transition rates over the past ten years, particularly among more disadvantaged groups, are increasing pressure on the secondary level to absorb new entrants. The Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and

Inclusive Education for the Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS), both are the scheme of Dept. of school education & literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. Of India is committed to universalize quality education at Secondary and Higher Secondary Stage. The RMSA offers a strategic opportunity to improve access and equity; enhance quality, accountability and ability to measure learning outcomes; and promote standardization of curriculum and examinations across states.

Action plan for Inclusive Education of Children & Youth with Disabilities

The comprehensive Action plan for Inclusive Education of Children & Youth with Disabilities (IECYD), 2005 formulated by Dept. of secondary & higher education, Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India has committed to ensure the inclusion of children & youth with disabilities in all available general educational settings by providing them with a learning environment that is available, accessible, affordable and appropriate. This plan covers the education of all children and young persons with disabilities from early childhood to higher education. Some of the main objectives of the Action Plan are –

- No child is denied admission in mainstream education;
- No child would be turned back on grounds of disability;
- Mainstream and specialist training institutions facilitate the growth of a cadre of teachers trained to work with the principles of inclusion;
- To facilitate access of girls with disabilities and disabled students from rural and remote to government hostels;
- To provide for home-based learning for persons with severe, multiple and intellectual disability;
- To emphasise job training and job-oriented vocational training;
- To promote an understanding of the paradigm shift from charity to development through a massive awareness, motivation and sensitisation campaign;
- To modify existing physical infrastructure and teaching methodologies to meet the needs of all children including children with special needs;
- All universities will have a Disability Coordinator to act as a 'one-stop shop' to assist disabled students in their needs;
- All universities will be assisted by U.G.C. in setting up a separate Department of Disability Studies including modules of inclusion;
- A Chair of Disability Studies will be set up in Central Universities;
- Universities will be encouraged to introduce Special Shuttle Services for disabled students.

Under this plan, the first level of intervention is proposed through the Integrated Child Development Services (I.C.D.S.) Programme. This reaches out to all children aged zero to 6 years, and anganwadi workers are trained to detect disabilities at an early stage. The plan envisages that all children with special needs as a part of mainstream schools will be fully equipped with barrier-free access, Braille books, Talking Text Books, Reading Machines and computers with speech software, by the year 2020.

To ensure sensitisation of teachers to the requirements of children with special needs regular in-service training has to be provided. A disability element in the syllabus of B.Ed. and M.Ed. courses also has to be strengthened. Selected schools have to be converted into model inclusive schools in order to demonstrate "what is necessary and more importantly, what is possible".

Inclusive Education of the Disabled at Secondary Stage

Realizing that inclusion of children and youth with special needs is not only a human right, it is also good education and promotes the development of social skills, the scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) has been replaced with a revised scheme of Inclusive Education for the Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS). The proposed new scheme launched from the year 2009-10 is focused to enable all students with special needs completing eight years of elementary schooling an opportunity to complete four years of secondary schooling (classes IX-XII), in an inclusive and enabling environment. This scheme also supports the training programmes for general school teachers to meet the needs of children with special needs. It is also proposed to make all schools disabled friendly.

The scheme covers all children studying at secondary stage in Government, local body and Government-aided schools, with one or more disabilities as defined under the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 and the National Trust Act, 1999 in the class IX to XII, namely blindness, low vision, leprosy cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disabilities, mental retardation, mental illness, autism and cerebral palsy, and may eventually cover speech impairment, learning disabilities, etc. Girls with disabilities receive special focus to help them gain access to secondary schools, as also to information and guidance for their developing potential. Setting up of Model inclusive schools in every State is envisaged.

Challenges in secondary education vary among countries. Major challenges like poverty and growing population put pressure on basic educational services. Low enrolment rate of children with special needs in regular schools, Inadequate Inclusive infrastructure, Lack of manpower, inadequate adapted curriculum and Lack of barrier free environment at secondary stage are the matter of major concerns in our country. Inequity in opportunities and access to quality secondary education are the major barriers to human development, economic growth, and poverty reduction.

Despite all the efforts made in recent decades in the developing world, secondary education remains a bottleneck for the expansion of educational attainment. The role of government in secondary education (whether centre, state or local) is not as clear as it is in elementary education. At this point in time, government's role should be to universalize opportunity to attend secondary school, rather than to universalize access.

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