

Importance of School Environment, Teachers' Attitude and Competencies for Promotion of Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy 2020 places a high value on inclusive education. It acknowledges that all children's rights are equal, regardless of caste, creed, color, or type of impairment. Education for people with physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as people who differ from one another in terms of aptitude, language, age, culture, gender, and other factors, is regarded as inclusive education. Special education is necessary in this case because it addresses the students with learning disabilities. The lack of adequate preparation and support for teachers to work inclusively makes it challenging to implement the inclusion policy. It is the duty of educators to establish learning environments where all students get equal education. Teachers have a critical role in encouraging the underachievers particularly in the case of children who are thought to have learning disabilities. The performance, duties, and identities of teachers are the ways to get over the obstacles that stand in the way of the successful growth of inclusive schools.

Key Words: School Education, Teachers' Attitude, Competencies, Disabilities, Inclusion Policy

1. Introduction:

Special Education is the education of students with special needs. In Special Education pupils get individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment and materials, accessible settings and other intervention designed to help learners with special needs achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in school and community. India has different beliefs and sentiments and it has critical structure, historical and religious facts that are more important to shape the course of special education and inclusion in India.

Over the years, the term 'inclusive education' has come to replace the term 'integrated education'. Many people working in the field of education in our country consider these two terms to be meaning the same thing. Inclusive education is based on the simple idea that every child and family is valued equally and deserves the same opportunities and experiences. Inclusive education is about children with disabilities – whether the disability is mild or severe, hidden or obvious – participating in everyday activities, just like they feel if their disability were not present. It's about building friendships, membership and having opportunities just like everyone else. They understand it as a change in terminology and nothing else (NCERT, Meeting Special Needs in School- A Manual, 2007). We must understand that the term inclusive education means much more than this. It refers to an education system that accommodates all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions.

2. Inclusive Education in Pre-Independent India:

Documentation of efforts for or against special education in India remains sparse before India's independence from Britain. Archaeologists discovered evidence of inclusion of people with disabilities in India from 2000 or more years ago in the form of adapted toys made accessible for children with disabilities. These small pieces of evidence are part of the "gurukul" system of education that existed in India for centuries before British rule. This system was sensitive to the unique cultural, social, and economic needs of the students and their families and imparted life skills education recognizing the potential within each student. Although there is not much documentation about students with disabilities in this system, the structure is seemingly inclusive. India was colonized by Great Britain until 1947, and the 'gurukul' system ended after India was colonized by the British. As a result of British rule, much of the education system in India was, and still is, "British style"-very cut and dry, based on rote memorization, with few special education services due to its inflexible nature. During this time period, the majority of children with disabilities were not in school. The Sargent Report by the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1944 suggested children with disabilities should be entirely mainstreamed.

3. Policies and Programmes Related to Inclusive Education in India:

Government of India and any other have tried to improve the education system focusing on inclusive education. Many policies, programmes have been implemented so far, to make education accessible for all. So, following are some of the initiatives that have been taken to make the world of education friendlier for CWSN:

- **The Plan of Action by Kothari Commission:**

The Plan of Action created by the Kothari Commission (1964) included people with disabilities, but unfortunately, the Government of India never implemented it. It reads "We now turn to the education of handicapped children. Their education has to be organized not merely on humanitarian grounds of utility. Proper education generally enables a handicapped child to overcome largely his/her handicap and make him/her into a useful citizen."

- **The National Policy on Education (NPE)** was created in 1986. Continuing in the spirit of the 1974 IEDC, the NPE states that children with "mild" disabilities should be included in mainstream classrooms, whereas children with "moderate to severe" disabilities should be placed in segregated schools. Many were upset that this policy contradicted Article 45 of the constitution, which lists equality in education as a fundamental right for all, and not just those with "mild" disabilities. The policy also included a provision regarding teacher training for all mainstream education teachers, by "including a compulsory special education component in pre-service training of general teachers."
- **Education for All (EFA,1990):** Education for All is led by UNESCO aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015. Not all children receive the education they need or want therefore this goal was put in place to help those children. EFA intensifies that large number of vulnerable and marginalized group of learners were excluded from the education system.
- **RCI, Rehabilitation Council of India (1992):** Indian Parliament enacted Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) in 1992. One of the main functions of the Council is to standardize the training courses for various categories of Professionals/Personnel for ensuring quality services to the people with disabilities. Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) is also a program amended by the Government of India for monitoring the services given person with

special needs. Teachers, who will be registered under RCI, will be trained for providing quality service to the student's respective needs.

- **The Salamanca Conference, UNESCO (1994)** has emphasized that school should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic or other conditions, that includes disabled and gifted children, street and working children from remote or nomadic population, children from linguistic ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas. All students should learn together, where possible and ordinary schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of the students while having a continuum of support and services to match these needs.
- **Person with Disability Act (PWD-1995)** was enacted to give proclamation on the full participation and equality for people with disability in nation building. Every child with disability has the right to free education till the age of 18 years. Act provides both preventive and promotional aspect of rehabilitation of person with disability, unemployment and establishment of homes for person with severe disability, etc. Special schools for children with disability shall be equipped with vocational training facilities. The PWD Act, 1995 says Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of rights and full participation) Act, 1995 clearly stipulates: Education is a human rights issue and children with Special Education Needs (SEN) should be part of schools, which should modify their operation to include all students. "The appropriate Government and the local authorities shall (a) ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate environment till he attains the age of 18 years; (b) endeavor to promote the integration of students with disabilities in the normal schools.
- **World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (2000)** says that education must take into account the most disadvantaged children including working children, remote rural dwellers, nomads, ethnic and linguistic minority children, affected by conflicts, education must take into account the most disadvantaged including working children, remote rural dwellers, nomads, ethnic and linguistic minority children, affected by conflicts, HIVAIDS, hunger and poor health and those with special learning needs.
- **National action plan for inclusion in education of children and youth with disability (2005):** The goal of action plan is to ensure the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in all available general educational settings, by providing them with a learning environment that is available, accessible affordable and appropriate. It emphasized on provision of home-based learning for persons with severe, multiple and intellectual disabilities.
- **Inclusive Education of Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS:2009-10):** The objective of IEDSS is to enable the disabled children who have completed eight years of elementary education to continue their education at the secondary stage in an inclusive environment in regular schools. It covers all children at secondary stage in government, local body and government aided schools with one or more disabilities as defined under the person with disability act (1995). IEDSS provides students with disabilities ages 14- 18, studying in public or government-funded schools, RS.3000 per school year from the central government to purchase the necessary materials to use to ensure inclusion of the student in the mainstream school system.

- **Right to Education- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Policy on Inclusion (2001 and 2012):** SSA ensures that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. SSA has adopted a zero-rejection policy. This means that no child having special needs should be deprived of the right to education and taught in an environment, which is best, suited to his/her learning needs (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, GOI, 2010). Every child with special needs should be placed in the neighbourhood schools, with needed support services. Children with special needs need to be facilitated to acquire certain skills that will enable them to access elementary education.
- **Rights of Person with Disability Act (2016):** Each child with criterion disability between the age group of 6 and 18 years shall have the right to free and compulsory education. The act has been made applicable to formulate equal opportunity policy which sets out the amenities provided to person with disabilities. The ultimate goal is to reach equity and equality. Authority has been forged upon the governments to take efficacious measures to make sure that the persons with disabilities enjoy their rights equally with others.
- **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018):** In Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, special focus is on improving quality of education for all students, including CWSN. The intervention is essential component provide support for various student-oriented activities which include identification and assessment of CWSN, provision of aids, teaching materials like Braille books, large print books, uniforms, assistive devices and equipment's, environment building and orientation programme to create a positive attitude and awareness about needs of CWSN.

Although the Government of India has attempted to create policies that are inclusive for people with disabilities, their implementation efforts have not resulted in an inclusive system of education (J.D.Singh, 2016).

4. School Environment:

The school environment comparable to learning environment is that environment where learning takes place. Booth & Okely(2005) defined school environment as the physical environment (e.g. facilities and equipment), school policies (e.g. time allocated for physical and health education sports) and school practices regulating physical education and sports banners to promote participation. Odeh, Oguche and Ivagher (2015) defined the school environment as the environment equipped with educational facilities formally used in teaching and learning. Odeh et al. outlined the characteristics of the school environment to include school buildings, furniture, playgrounds, sporting facilities and other related equipment which aid the teacher's delivery of lesson. Examples of buildings found in the school includes classroom blocks, libraries and laboratories; while furniture's connotes tables and desk, seats, cupboards for housing specimens and models. Play ground includes the space created for plays and games while sporting facilities includes football, table tennis equipment, hand ball, sports wears. In the context of this study, the school environment encompasses all components found in the school which facilitates teaching and learning. These components include the school building, furniture, equipment, instructional materials, teachers, peers, play-ground, group and other people involved in the development of a child. Educational facilities in primary schools should be of immense benefit to both normal children and children with learning disabilities.

5. Teachers' Attitudes:

Attitudes are dispositions to respond to or to evaluate an attitude object. Attitude objects may refer to a person or a group of people, which can be evaluated favorably or unfavorably, on the continuum like-dislike (Eagly&Chaiken, 1993). Attitudes may contain cognitive, affective and behavioral components, and often influence judgments or guide social behavior. Such influence can result from a relatively spontaneous process associated with the automatic activation of the attitude upon encountering the attitude object, or a more deliberate process involving careful consideration of all available information and consequences of certain judgments or behaviors (Fazio, 1990). The spontaneous process involves automatic evaluations that come into mind whenever the attitude object is present.

- **Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education**

Teachers' perceptions have been a topic of research in almost every developed country. There are numerous studies that demonstrate the reluctance of teachers and their insecurity in the implementation of integration policy, even when it is a state law. The overview of Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2011) showed that the majority of teachers adopt neutral or negative attitudes regarding inclusive education. In like manner, a survey by Rakap and Kaczmarek (2010) showed on average a 'slightly negative attitude' towards inclusive education of the participating teachers. Moreover, Sari, Çeliköz and Seçer (2009) concluded that the educators participating in their study were 'undecided' on the idea of inclusion of students with disabilities. In contrast, there are numerous research attempts that present slightly positive to very positive teachers' attitudes: Additionally, a number of studies suggest that the teachers' agreement with the philosophy of integration in theory and their willingness to teach these students may be quite distant from the application of inclusive education in practice, where the role of the state is dominant. The meager government grant, which leads to deficits in personnel and equipment, seems to cause uncertainty among teachers (Koutrouba, Vamvakari&Theodoropoulos 2008; Memisevic&Hodzic 2011; Zoniou-Sideri&Vlachou, 2006). A further adverse factor is the concern of teachers with regard to their own ability, and the appropriateness of schools, to develop an inclusive learning environment (Shevlin, Winter & Flynn 2013). Nevertheless, there are cases where teachers report that inclusion is being successfully implemented in their school (Humphrey & Symes, 2013) and their attitude is identified as 'very positive' (Jerlinder, Danermark& Gill, 2010).

6. Teachers' Competence:

Competencies are the skills that enable a teacher to be successful. The importance of teachers' competence for inclusive practice is evident in its effect on student learning. In general, research has indicated that specific cognitive abilities and personality characteristics determine to what extent teachers can be effective in delivering high quality instruction, which, in turn, fosters student learning. For example, Stronge and colleagues (2007) found that teachers that were rated higher in the domains of instruction, student assessment, classroom management, and personal qualities, were most effective in terms of student outcomes. In general, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge positively affects student outcomes (Kunter et al., 2013) and hence, it is not surprising that measures of teacher preparation and certification, as indicators of teachers' knowledge and skills, were the strongest predictors of student achievement in reading and mathematics (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The multidimensional model of teacher competence (Kunter et al., 2011, 2013) reflects that teacher competence not only includes cognitive aspects, such as skills and knowledge, but also beliefs related to learning, motivation and self-regulation. That is, teachers' professional competence involves skills and knowledge as well as beliefs and motivation, which, in interplay, will determine the extent to which a teacher can successfully

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master the situation (Klieme, Hartig, & Rauch, 2008). Similarly, Bandura (1990) suggests that competence not only involves knowledge and skills, but also the ability to use these successfully in different situations and under diverse circumstances, many of which contain unpredictable and stressful elements. To this extent, research has indicated that teachers' beliefs in their ability to positively affect student learning has been associated to better student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

7. Importance of the Study:

The teacher-student relation is the backbone of many generations in the past. Teachers and educational administration play an essential role in imparting the knowledge in the students and also moulding the character building confidence, making strength and over all vision of life. The first and foremost role of teacher and administrator is motivation. The empirical evidence in the area of inclusive education clearly indicates that teachers and parental attitudes are the key factors for making inclusive education a real success.

Researcher analyzed the Indian education policies and reported that policies in India have to be improved towards inclusion because they are not perfectly inclusive. Many of them tend to discriminate people with 'severe' disabilities, or people with intellectual disabilities from any kind of education. At present Indian education policies are more inclusive; but the major problem is in its implementation at ground level inclusive schools have to address the needs of all children in every community and the central and state governments have to manage inclusive classrooms.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, designing a more inclusive classroom environment for children with special needs means rethinking traditional school structures. Design for all approaches encourage educators to design products and processes to complement the abilities of all children in all circumstances. Teachers should work with a team of specialists (such as physical therapists and occupational therapists) who can develop plans to meet the different needs of each individual child there is no "one system fits all." The results can be mixed ability classes where teachers plan activities with both high and low level learners in mind, opportunities for special needs students to learn with their non-disabled peers and access to special services based on individual student needs.

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