

ACCEPTANCE OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS – THE KEY TO UNIVERSAL ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The number of children with learning disabilities is on the rise. The latest data from UNICEF estimates the number of children with disabilities to be over 240 million. In India, 1.67% of the 0-19 population suffers with disabilities of one or the other kind. 35.29% of disabled people of world are children. Only 1% of children with disabilities have access to schools and one-third of most disabilities are preventable. But as on date a fully comprehensive data on this topic in India remains incomplete. Statistics aside, it is a fact that there is an increase in the number of Children with Special Needs (CWSN). The reasons are many. But society's lack of responsibility towards this cannot be denied. There are many socioeconomic factors that cause disability in children. Again, it is the society's attitude that acts as an impediment in helping a child overcome such disabilities and be a part of the mainstream. In most areas of development, a CWSN is disadvantaged compared to children without disabilities. Be it education, nutrition, protection from violence, exploitation, and accessibility, these children do not enjoy equal rights with other mainstream children. The Right to Education Act 2009 in India speaks of ensuring Free and Compulsory Elementary Education for all children. Universal Primary Education set as the 2nd Millennium Goal by UN was to be achieved by 2015 and this objective was also taken up by Samagra Siksha Abhiyan in India, Equal right to education has been assured by the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016. Yet, out of 78.64 lakh children with disability in India, three-fourths of those aged five years don't attend any educational institution, according to a 2019 UNESCO Report. The situation has been further aggravated by the pandemic and consequent lock downs. It has been globally realized that integrated education is essential in bringing these children to school, develop their intellectual capability, generate their self-sufficiency, social skills and to open avenues for employment. Social barriers in the mainstream regarding disability, lack of awareness and empathy, lack of relevant infrastructure for such children in most schools, and majorly lack of acceptance are some of the reasons behind the exclusion of these children from mainstream education. The objective of this paper is to analyse the road blocks to the inclusion of these children into education to suggest possible solutions to remove them and ensure their acceptance.

Keywords: *Acceptance, inclusion, awareness.*

1. Introduction

Education today, is one of the most important means for improving the personal qualities of an individual, for capacity building, for overcoming difficulties and in the process to bring about sustained improvement in the quality of his life. The role of education to meet basic learning needs of every person in order to shape human development has been emphasized through several cross-cultural studies. Development economists have shown through their studies that one generation of educated parent can bring about changes in the quality of life of the next generation, their health and well-being.

Therefore, Universal Elementary Education has been one of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. The target date for achieving this was 2015. However, this could not be achieved. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations, also aims to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education" and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This also could not be reached.

1.1. Objective

While the immense impact of COVID-19 on education of children is cited as a major cause of this, the objective of this paper is to highlight the lack of acceptance of Special Needs Children in India as a vital reason why this target will always be difficult to achieve.

1.2. Present status of school education

According to a Report published by UNESCO and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, dated 3rd July 2019, out of 78.64 lakhs children with disability in India, three fourth of those aged five years and one-fourth of children aged between 5 to 19 do not attend school. It further states that only 61% of them attended an educational institution, 12% had dropped out while 27% had never been to school at all.

There is difference among different types of disabilities. 20% of children with visual and hearing impairment do not attend school, whereas more than 50% of those with multiple disabilities, mental diseases and mental retardation do not attend school.

There are fewer girls than boys found in schools. What is most appalling out of the total population of disabled children in India, 45% failed to attend literacy. The impact of COVID-19 has made it worse.

In India, access to even quality life for Children with Special Needs has been historically limited. There was a time when the birth of children with disabilities was considered a curse of God. Also, it was believed that persons with disabilities were complicated and harmful, like Manthara in the Ramayana and Shakuni in the Mahabharata. Therefore, a negative attitude towards disability grew in the minds of people over centuries. Even standing now in the 21st century we find remnants of such thoughts in the minds of people. Therefore, in addition to lack of resources, access to schools, inadequate architecture and understanding of their unique learning needs these children face barriers in accessing education due to lack of acceptance.

2. Accepting the CWSN

At every step a child with disability faces the lack of acceptance. The immediate reaction of parents on the birth of such a child is one of denial. They find it difficult to accept that their child has a difficulty. In case of uneducated parents, they remain indifferent to the difficulties of the child and take it as the will of God.

Finally, when the parents go for medical advice and receive the diagnosis it cuts like a double-edged sword. On one side the parents face the fact of their child's disability and on the other the pain of their child's exclusion by family members and the society. It is here that a very difficult journey starts for the parents. They must reorient themselves to the current need of the child reorganize and make fresh plans. Parents are confused with not much of help coming from the immediate surroundings. Stress leads to spousal misunderstanding. The parents often cannot come to an understanding as to what is the best way to cope with the situation, where to go, from whom to seek help?

They need support, understanding and above all trust to go ahead. This is a point where they often lose hope or give up thinking there is no salvation. The opportunity of early intervention is often lost. Those who overcome go a long way in developing their child.

3. Lack of acceptance and exclusion – case studies

Lack of acceptance is one of the major impediments to inclusive education. It is a common phenomenon that parents of neuro-typical children react to Disabled children being in the same class room.

In July 2022, three neuro-typical children, siblings, came for admission to Blooming Dale Academy School, a reputed inclusive school in Kolkata. While they were completing their worksheet for assessment, few disabled children came down the stairs for their Physical Education class. The father reacted to the fact that the school “admits such children” and refused to even let his children complete their assessment and left.

A mother whose child has autism and is in Blooming Dale Academy broke down in tears as she related how other mothers withdraw from the park when she takes her child to play there because he is “different”.

Sometimes schools are not sensitive to the needs of a child with disability. Sourya, a child with learning disability was held in strong criticism by the teachers in a school he attended in Kolkata. He started resisting going to school. When his mother met the teachers and tried to draw attention to this she was not heard. “They said I was insane!”, she said. Yet despite being a slow learner Sourya is good at elocution, a quality the school did not even explore.

Sudha Madhavi, whose child, Raju has epilepsy, autism and a learning disability said in an interview on 15th July 2022 at Bangaluru that nobody accepted her child in a mainstream school and she had to teach her son at home all by herself. “I am alone fighting for my child,” she said.

Another parent from Bengaluru not willing to disclose her identity, whose daughter had cerebral palsy said that two schools refused admission to her child because she was not normal (Agarwal, 2023; The Wire, 2022).

A sample survey was conducted in February 2023 among a cross section of parents of children in special needs, from different countries in an Institute in Mumbai where they had come for the neuro-rehabilitative therapies of their children. The parents were from Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Canada, USA, and Mauritius.

It was revealed that they received complete support from the government, the school, the family, and the society. Most of them never faced a situation of exclusion or isolation. So, they could concentrate on the development of their children.

David (name changed), now 16 was diagnosed with autism when he was three years old. He progressed well and was doing his academics but the lockdown had an adverse effect on him. He stopped socializing, withdrew into himself and refused to leave his home to go anywhere, when all attempts to send him to school failed, the teachers would come home on a regular basis to teach David. The mother got full family support in her efforts to guide David out of his difficulty.

Mary (name changed) from Kenya is the mother of a triplet. All have autism. The diagnosis came when they were two. It was difficult to manage them as they would break everything, did not sleep, and did not sit still for long. Mary went into a depression, became suicidal. But it was with family support that she could stabilize and concentrate on the development of her children. The children attend school, now at the age of eleven they are doing better. She came to Mumbai for the neuro rehabilitative therapy of her children as she found it less expensive and effective here and expressed her gratitude to her husband for supporting her.

A similar survey was conducted among parents of special needs children in Kolkata in January 2023. The picture revealed was different. In most cases not only the children but the parents face exclusion from the society. Most of the children could not fit into mainstream schools for lack of empathy and understanding of their problems. Though acceptance by the immediate family has improved to a large extent there are still cases of gross intolerance by the father. They are mostly not aware of the facilities available from the Government so do not avail them. Due to lack of proper awareness the parents do not know what is the path ahead of them.

Srinjoy is autistic with severe OCD. The mother and the uncle are sincerely working on the development of the child by admitting him in an inclusive school and by regularly taking him for neuro rehabilitative therapies. But there is no acceptance from the father. Srinjoy is often beaten up and ill-treated by the father which causes severe setback in his development.

Aryan (name changed) took admission to Blooming Dale Academy in Class IV with severe autism. He had attention deficiency, and would not settle down in the classroom. He started to like the school environment and his teachers. His performance in his academics improved too. After the lockdown his behavioural problems increased. When he was in Class IX he was withdrawn from school because his family felt that he was not fit for mainstream education. Later the mother confided that she did this under family pressure.

Inclusive education is the only path that would lead to Universal Elementary Education but the prevailing condition makes it obvious that the main impediment to inclusivity is lack of acceptance of disability by the society, the mainstream schools, teachers, and parents.

This is even though there are strong legislations laid down by the Government of India in form of the Right to Education Act 2009 and the Persons with Disability Act 2016.

4. Legislation

The Right to Education Act 2009 speaks of Free and Compulsory Education for all. It has made provisions for Resource Rooms and Resource teachers. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) states that educational institutes should “provide reasonable accommodation according to the individual’s requirements and provide necessary support, individualised or otherwise, in environments that maximise academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion,”

But these legislations still have certain gaps which reduces its effectiveness in making inclusive learning successful. There is a lack of harmony between the main legislations that govern inclusive education in India. For example, even though the RPWD Act makes inclusive education a statutory guarantee, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) does not even define inclusive education.

The Right to Education Act mandates enrolment, but does not make provision of resources needed for the actual education of a child with disabilities. Provision of home-based education is not strong, and so in rural India if a child opts for home-based education the child may not be getting any

education at all. Laws relating to right to education and disabilities have certain ambiguities too. For example, it does not specify where the children with disability must study. There are gaps in terms of appropriate norms and standards applicable to all educational institutions. The availability of Government Resource Centres and Resource Teachers are inadequate and so they cannot cater to the needs of the children with disabilities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) came about in 2020. By 2030 the NEP aims to “provide inclusive and equitable quality education and encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone”. Children with benchmark disabilities as defined by the Right to Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 has been included in the NEP and it recommends the option of attending regular schools or special schools, resource centres as well as home schooling. It also says that special teachers and trainers will be available for the various rehabilitation and educational needs of such students.

The NEP talks of Universal Design for Learning which may be curriculum, teaching and assessment tools designed to meet the needs of all learners including those with disabilities. It recommends the use of assistive technology, like screen readers and speech softwares.

Individual Education Plan is recommended for the Special Needs Children to be prepared in consultation by parents, teachers and other professionals and reviewed period.

The NEP recommends disability friendly infrastructure in schools with facilities of ramp, elevators etc. to offer easy access to the Special Needs children. It recommends teachers’ training, collaboration between regular schools and special schools to provide support to the Special Needs Children. In fact, these guidelines are in line with the global trends towards inclusive education. However, the NEP in a way ignores the reality. As of now not only are most teachers unprepared for such specialized teaching, but most Indian schools are severely understaffed. The strategy also makes no mention of how it intends to build individual-accessible alternative home-schooling systems. In a recent survey conducted by the Delhi Child Rights Commission, 60 percent of schools claimed having no pupils with disabilities, while another 28 percent reported having less than 1%. The new strategy does not include a plan for how to access to education or what changes to the curriculum will be made to ensure that students with learning problems are not left out in today’s highly competitive Indian educational systems (Sharma, Chari, & Chunawala, 2017).

The legislation, policies and recommendations in recent days make it clear that we are not oblivious to the requirement of Special Needs Children but where we are falling short is in the area of implementation. Even though concepts like equality, equity, and inclusion appear several times in the policy statement, there are numerous gaps that need to be addressed. For example, reservation of seats for the Special Needs Children has been laid down. But it is applicable to Government schools. Private schools are not bound by this and so their doors are not readily opened for a Special Needs Child.

This again brings us to the point of acceptance/ Unless there is acceptance in our heart no amount of research or legislation will bring about a change in the status of inclusion of these children in education.

5. Recommendations

- A detailed data in the Government portals regarding the number of disabled children according to the category of disability. After the Census Report 2011 no data appears to be available.
- Concentrated awareness programs to generate consciousness regarding the rights of the children with special needs and their acceptance in the mainstream society. The institutions may organise initiatives to raise awareness of and acceptance of diversity as an element of human existence.
- Regular surveys by local bodies and NGOs to identify such children in the locality and bring them to schools for admission.
- Structural, funding and attitudinal changes to ensure that no child is left out of the right to education.
- Changes in teaching methods to aid the inclusion of diverse learners. There should be regular training in the use of teaching learning materials
- Establishing a coordinating mechanism under the Ministry of Human Resource Development for effective convergence of all education programs of children with disabilities
- Centers for counselling of parents which they can approach for guidance when they are struggling for a way forward.
- More Resource Centers across the country specially in remote areas
- Sensitization of the society in matters of acceptance through workshops and programs and discussions in the mass media

- Government support to NGOs and private institutions which are working for inclusion and acceptance of the Special Needs Children. It is also time that the attitude of acceptance and inclusion is taken up by the Government in its Institutions more seriously.
- Effective implementation of the Right to Persons with Disability Act, 2016 with initiative from the Government and civil bodies. For example, this Act specifies that any act or comment which may cause the dignity of a disabled person to be hurt is punishable even by imprisonment. But in reality, there are incidences of isolation and ostracism which causes hurt to the person and the family. Most of the parents are not even aware of the facilities/specified in this Act for their children.
- The objective of all who are working for this cause is to find the Special/need children an equitable place in the mainstream

6. Conclusion

Despite all the difficulties when parents accept the challenge and mobilise their child ahead with optimism and determination they meet with success.

If we look around, we will meet persons in every walk of life who have succeeded in overcoming their disability and are doing well for themselves.

This is as true as the fact that many children with special needs drop out of education. The difference is brought about by a difference in attitude. And this difference is in terms of acceptance. In terms of having faith in their capability and in terms of their acceptance as a part of the mainstream society.

Acceptance can only ensure that these children are entitled to their rights to free and quality education. We as teachers., parents and members of a civil society must wake up to the fact that by including them we can make our society stronger because they are rich in possibilities. And if they are not included Universal Elementary Education will just remain a distant dream.

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