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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF DISABILITY – NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS

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### ABSTRACT

Awareness on inclusive education in schools throughout the Indian subcontinent is still at the infancy stage. Educational institutions are somewhat skeptical about having both normal and special children studying in the same classroom. The inclusion of individual disabilities has been a societal challenge for research and practice. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the developmental process of inclusion services for individuals with disabilities in India. The paper also provides a comparative picture of inclusive services across the world in order to depict the progression of inclusive services for children with exceptional needs in Indian schools since its independence. The authors made an attempt to highlight the key issues and challenges against successful inclusive education and put forward certain views that may assist in providing appropriate inclusive education for individuals with disabilities in India.

## INTRODUCTION

While India has made strenuous efforts in improving access to preschool education, numerous challenges have to be addressed to enhance its quality. The National Education Policy 2020 and the country's commitment to meet UN Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.2 by 2030 and ensure that all children irrespective of gender concerns have access to quality pre-primary education provide opportunities to ensure equitable access to quality preschool education. Central to meeting national targets is the enforcement of the National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Care and Education. The increased budget allocation to preschool education, priority given to professional preparation for the early childhood workforce and adapting technology to monitor government programmes have considerable potential to enhance the early childhood system. In India, services for individuals with special needs are still provided in segregated settings, i.e., special schools, special programs by the nongovernment organization (NGOs) etc. Educators, researchers, and even TV shows as well as film makers are attempting to develop public awareness concerning the spectrum of services for students with special needs. In India, with an understanding of the importance of including children with disabilities in mainstream society, individuals with disabilities can achieve more functional independence that can promote productive living.

According to Balasubramanian (2012), —the awareness on inclusive education in schools throughout the country is still at the infancy stage, and educational institutions are somewhat sceptical about having both normal and special children studying in the same classroom. And in circumstances, where a former excluded child is given admission into a mainstream classroom, the outcome of the action is questionable. Currently, many children with disabilities are instructed in separate educational settings, but professionals and parents are calling for more equitable inclusive education for these students. It is imperative that inclusion in schools (including students with disabilities with nondisabled peers in educational settings) takes place to promote equity for students with disabilities in society's settings. To this end, Indian schools should work collaboratively with parents and other community leaders to prepare productive citizens. This can generate an understanding of an inclusive society that can support the social value of equity and to minimize the stigma of disability for students who are served in separate special schools. Since school is one of the main contributors to society, it is important to develop knowledge, and understanding of the existence of the term —Inclusion or, inclusive education! in Indian society!

**Research and Practices of Inclusion around the World:** According to the U.S. Department of Education (1996), 43% of the students with disabilities in the U. S. receive the majority of their educational program in inclusive environments.

Ensuring that these students have meaningful access to the curriculum and instruction provided in general education classrooms requires a sound knowledge of how educational reforms are impacting special education (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim cited in Vitello, Mithaug, & Erlbaum Associates, 1998). On the same note, the theme—Inclusive Education in Brazil was introduced in the beginning of 90s, adopted by the UNESCO's World Conference on Special Education Needs Education: Access and Quality (Sasaki, 2004). Presently, the inclusion movement is actively in place in all over Brazil; the parallel practice of both special education and regular education is supported by both federal and state legislations and policies as well as private initiatives (Sasaki, 2004). In addition, the Step-by-Step Foundation in Ukraine, a nongovernmental, non-profit organization that promotes the process of democratic reform in education (Association for Childhood Education International 2007). This foundation fosters quality education for all children, especially children with special needs and other underserved children (Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, 2003). The project approaches reform with three areas:

- Teacher training,
- Inclusion, and
- Educating minorities.

According to Kolupayeva, (2004) it appears that attitudes have changed a little. Part of the problem seems to be that many people believe that "typical" children and adults are presently not receiving appropriate educational and economic support, and consequently worry that less will be provided if individuals with disabilities begin to take a share of the country's very limited resources. Despite this, as a nation, Ukraine's rhetoric appears to support a willingness to change cultural biases against individuals with disabilities (Kolupayeva, 2004). Ukraine's education system undoubtedly has come a long way since independence in spite of many financial and societal challenges (Association for Childhood Education International, 2007). As one of the top financially stable country, The United States of America is continuously reauthoring the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA (1990, 1997, and 2004) to make education more appropriate and inclusive so that individuals with disabilities can be functionally independent to the maximum extent as possible. According to Smith (2006), based on the report of school ministers, and inspectors in United Kingdom, continuous professional development of teachers and teaching assistants is vital to improve their knowledge and skills to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Smith (2006) also mentioned that the parents, teachers and disability campaigners have voiced concern over the continued closure of dedicated special schools in the name of "inclusion" - where children with special needs are placed in mainstream schools.

**The Indian Context:** It is known that 73 million children of primary school age were out of school in 2010, down from a high of over 110 million out-of-school children in the mid-1990s, according to new estimates by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). About Eighty percent of the Indian population lives in rural areas without provision for special schools. It means, there are an estimated 8 million children out of school in India (MHRD 2009 statistics), many of whom are marginalized by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. Inclusion may be the keyword in India's current education policy, but there is a world of difference between the law and its implementation (Deepa, 2006). It is noted that a majority of the schools don't have special educators or counsellors, even if they have students with disabilities, though the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 says that children with disabilities have the right to be taught by a qualified teacher. In the survey conducted by the National Centre, 55 per cent of the 89 schools were found to have admitted students with disabilities, but only 20 employed special educators while twelve provided training to teachers for working with students with disabilities (Deepa, 2006). Another study by Chatterjee (2003) mentioned that the Constitution of India is dominated by the sentiment of social justice and equity. Led by this sentiment the constitution demands that India's 35 million physically disabled, if not the 5 million mentally challenged, children should be given

preferential access to primary and secondary schools, instead, nine-tenths of them are systematically excluded. Chatterjee (2003) also mentioned that the parental community is also resistant to the idea of inclusive education. Lack of awareness, sensitivity and education of inclusive education within the parental community made a negative impact on integrated education. In spite of the fact that the subject has been deeply researched around the world to the extent that the know-how and methodologies to introduce the concept in classrooms have been developed, inclusive educationists insist that such know-how has to conform to Culturally Appropriate Practices and Precepts (CAPP) (Chatterjee, 2003). In addition, Lakshmi (2003) noted that roughly 10% of the Indian population falls under the category of some form of disability, out of which around 2% are people with mental disabilities. Even though a great initiative has already been made in the field of education in recent years and efforts to see every individual become literate have gained much momentum. However, the field of special education is still in its infancy as far as mainstreaming and integrated education is concerned (Lakshmi 2003) in spite of the sincere effort of RCI, and DPEP. Disabled people in India have been subjected to direct and indirect discrimination for centuries. As the TV show — *Aap Ki Antara* (2009) represents that the attitude of parents of nondisabled children and other people in dealing with disabled individuals is still creating a barrier between normal and abnormal discrimination. The expectation of parents is how they were made to believe or satisfied by the different approaches to the educational needs of these children (Shivagami cited in Chadha, 2003). Special Schools which admitted special children were supported by welfare services and provided specialized services in the form of consultants, therapists, and special educators. They, however, promoted segregation, and the children enrolled in these schools could not escape from the social stigma, nor could they overcome this by following some role models in these schools, who developed a positive attitude towards the educational needs of disabled children and increase access through simple adaptations (Cited in Chadha, 2003). Drawing data from The National Census reports on terms of educational levels, only 11 per cent of children with disabilities between the age group 5–18 in urban areas (less than one per cent in rural areas) were enrolled in special schools, while 55percent of adults with disabilities were illiterate (59% in rural and 40% in urban areas), with only seven percent in rural and 18 per cent in urban areas have completed secondary education (Kalyanpur, 2008, mentioned in Kohama, 2012). Most of the data available follow this trend, suggesting that services are significantly more available in urban areas and people and students with disabilities are more marginalized in rural areas. However, interestingly, in the National Census, the data is the opposite in regards to inclusive schooling, or at least attending a mainstream school. Per 1000 students with a disability between the ages of 5-18, enrollment years in mainstream schools were actually higher in rural areas versus urban areas; 475 out of 1000 students with disabilities attended a mainstream school in rural areas, versus 444 out of 1000 students with disabilities in urban areas. This may be because there is a higher prevalence of special schools in urban areas, which would make sense considering that urban areas have significantly more resources ([http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF)).

**Issues and Challenges in Inclusion:** 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. Moreover, the number of students dropping out of school is getting higher, especially in poverty-stricken areas (Sing, 2016). Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013) examined the current skill levels of regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi, India in order to teach students with disabilities in inclusive education settings. They reported that nearly 70 per cent of the regular school teachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Further, 87 per cent of the teachers did not have access to support services in their classrooms (Cited in Sing, 2016). Educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is considered one of the better ways to provide education to the population of India (Shah, 2005,

Shah *et al.*, 2014). Sing (2016). The following measures are suggested the for better implementation of Inclusive Education in India.

- The Right to Education (RTE) must apply to all citizens of India. State and central Governments as well as all the other social actors should recognize the importance of a broadened concept of inclusive education that addresses the diverse needs of all learners.
- A policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout the Indian education system (NCF, 2005). Schools need to become centres that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially the differently abled children from marginalized sections, and children in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education.
- The preparation of teachers for rural special education programs should be planned differently, as the aim of these programs would be to integrate disabled persons in their own environment and community.
- As a system, inclusive education should be flexible. Its flexibility must be reflected in the methods and materials used to give these children the widest possible access to the regular curriculum.
- A school-based support team should develop strategies for the whole school to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs. This team should also be a resource for teachers experiencing problems in their classrooms.
- The school has the primary responsibility for helping children learn alongside their typically developing peers. An inclusive school must enable education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children, particularly those who face the greatest barriers to achieving their right to education.
- Parents have a right to be involved in all decision-making concerning their child. They should be seen as partners in the education process. Where there is such cooperation, parents have been found to be very important resources for the teachers and the schools.
- Bringing special children into mainstream requires adjustments that schools need to make in advance. Transport facilities should be altered so that these children can move around with relative ease. Architecturally, there should be ramps and wheelchair access constructed in service areas such as toilets.
- Student-oriented components, such as medical and educational assessment, books and stationery, uniforms, transport allowance, reader allowance and stipend for girls, support services, assistive devices, boarding the lodging facility, therapeutic services, teaching-learning materials, etc should provide according to the need of the students.
- Differently abled children should be treated equally as normal children and instead of looking at them in sympathy their talents and abilities should be recognized for their self-respect and welfare of the society.
- Necessary school supplies such as audio learning or textbooks in Braille should be made available. Suitable modification to the examination system may be required, so as to eliminate pure mathematical and logical assessments.
- Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education could be formed and developed in the context of an educational system which can provide some specific conditions in order to have good practice in this field.
- Families with children without disabilities should develop relationships with families with children with disabilities and be able to make a contribution.
- In-service training programs of two to three weeks' duration for general educators and special educators in all disabilities and in specific areas of disability should arrange to effectively teach children with disabilities.
- Those schools that are committed to taking in children with special needs, then teachers must attend workshops in order to be adjusted to the child's needs.
- Periodic evaluation of the training programs and constant updating to meet the challenges of changing trends in special education should be part of the planning of teacher preparation.
- Inclusion should not be the sole responsibility of the specific class teacher. Everybody should be involved and take responsibility. Training for teachers should be sustained and ongoing. It should most importantly focus on attitudinal change.
- The reform of the curriculum should be made in parallel with proper training for teachers regarding their knowledge of inclusion and its principles. The curriculum for each of the above programs should be carefully developed by an expert group which includes practising special teachers. (Sing, 2016)

### Suggestions and recommendation

The disability is to be understood as different abilities or special needs to display ability. Handicap is more understood as a spastic concept and well-integrated into the culture of common people more relates the term to physically and mentally challenged individuals.

The concept of Emotional Behaviour Disability (EBD) is not there but juvenile delinquent is understood and the term learning disability is far understood either (Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2008). In a recent survey conducted among a few resource teachers (who were trained to be special educators) working in the General Education department in Kerala, the authors learned of several obstacles that special education-certified teachers face in the employment market. They are:

- A teacher with special education certification will not be hired in regular school, rather they will only be hired in special schools;
- Very few universities provide special education certification programs and that limits job opportunities;
- Majority of parents still don't want their non-disabled child to be educated with a disabled child therefore sped teachers have no role to be part of the inclusion program.

The principal mandates some professional training for the staffs to have some professional development in special education (interview conducted in June 2009). According to a blog posted by Anusha Balasubhramanium, inclusive education in India strives to address the learning needs of children with special needs, with a particular focus on those who are subject to being isolated and excluded. And in circumstances, where a former excluded child is given admission into a mainstream classroom, the outcome of the action is questionable (Balasubhramanium, 2012). The key barriers of providing inclusive education are:

- Inappropriate/inadequate curriculum
- Lack of awareness and affordability among parents and the community
- Lack of resources
- Lack of trained teachers to provide inclusive education
- And many more social, political, and economical barriers

There are some private schools, especially international schools in the country such as The Heritage School, Akshar School, Vydehi School of Excellence, Amar Jyoti School, Chettinad Srihari Vikasam, SPJ Sadhana School, Trivandrum International School etc. that offer individualized learning programs for children with special needs. However, in public/government schools the policy has been accepted in principle, but facilities are not available to support this initiatives.

Therefore, it will be intriguing to experience the effective inclusive education services for children with disabilities and exceptionalities to be educated with their non-disabled peers. Free and appropriate education is a right, not a privilege. Freedom is earned only when the opportunities are utilized in productive manner; credibility can be developed with a proactive approaches regardless the presence of disabilities.

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