Practices on education of Children with Special Needs in India

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Abstract: After independence, the Indian Constitution directed the state to ensure provision of basic education to all children up to the age of 14 years. The education of people with disabilities was, however, not explicit in the early constitutional provisions except for guaranteeing similar rights for people with disabilities as other members of society.

The Education Commission of 1966 (Kothari Commission) drew attention to the education of children with disabilities. In 1974, for the first time, the necessity of integrated education was explicitly emphasized under the scheme for Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC). In pursuit of the goal of providing basic education for all, the National Policy on Education (1986) and its follow-up actions have been major landmarks.

The World Declaration on Education for All adopted in 1990 gave further boost to the various processes already set in motion in the country. The Rehabilitation Council of India Act 1992 initiated a training programme for the development of professionals to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. The enactment of the People with Disability Act in 1996 provided legislative support. This act makes it mandatory to provide free education to children with disabilities in an appropriate environment until the age of 18 years. In 1999, the government passed the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act for the economic rehabilitation of people with disabilities. These acts have been instrumental in bringing about a perceptive change/improvement in the attitude of government, NGOs and people with disabilities.

In recent years, two major initiatives have been launched by the government for achieving the goals of universalization of elementary education (UEE): the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994 and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2002. Programmes launched in the recent past have been able to make only a limited impact in terms of increasing the participation of children with disabilities in formal education. This situation needs to change; a focused effort is required. Keeping in view recent initiatives on inclusive education, a comprehensive review is necessary to help in better understanding the present status of education of children with disabilities, and how inclusive education can be promoted.

Introduction

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These acts have been instrumental in bringing about a perceptive change/improvement in the attitude of government, NGOs and people with disabilities. In recent years, two major initiatives have been launched by the government for achieving the goals of universalization of elementary education (UEE): the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994 and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2002.
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The Constitution of India and the educational policies envisaged in post-independent India reflect a perseverance and commitment to the fulfilment of UEE. The Constitution states that ‘free and compulsory education should be provided for all children until they complete the age of 14 years’. The following are the national level practices on education of children with special needs.

**Early childhood care and education:**

It is now globally recognized that systematic provision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) can help in the development of children in a variety of ways, such as through group socialization, inculcation of healthy habits, stimulation of creative learning processes, and enhanced scope for overall personality development. ECCE is a support for UEE, and indirectly influences enrolment and retention of girls in primary schools by providing substitute care facilities for younger siblings.

At present, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) is the most widespread ECCE provision. In addition, there are pre-schools and balwadis under the Central Social Welfare Board. Some state government schemes and private efforts are also being undertaken. ECCE is being promoted as an holistic input for fostering health, psychosocial, nutritional and educational development of children. Efforts have to be made to achieve greater convergence of ECCE programmes implemented by various government departments as well as voluntary agencies by involving urban local bodies and gram panchayat (village councils).

There is a need to promote an active policy of inclusion in pre-schools for children with disabilities. There is also an urgent need to develop tools for early identification using inclusive principles rather than looking at disabilities. ECCE will be possible only when there are strong linkages with the primary health care system. At present, experiments such as district rehabilitation centres, which work separately from primary health care centres, have not achieved much progress in ECCE. This is mainly because primary health care personnel lack of knowledge and skills on ECCE. Components of early identification and intervention of children with disabilities are limited in the curriculum of medical, nursing, and health workers training programmes, as well as in primary health care personnel training programmes. It is a requirement that curriculum should go beyond mere awareness building and lead to development of practical skills.

**Project for Integrated Education Development (PIED) and Integrated Education for the Disabled Children (IEDC):**

The government launched the Project for Integrated Education Development (PIED) with assistance from UNICEF in 1986. The implementation of PIED in 10 demonstration sites in rural and urban contexts encouraged policy-makers to include children with moderate disabilities in 1992. In practice, children with multiple and severe disabilities were also integrated in project areas as a consequence of the lack of special schools, and through the commitment to providing education for all that was generated in these areas. Evaluation of PIED showed higher retention rates of children with disabilities, and a positive change in teacher practices.

The success of this project resulted in the centrally sponsored scheme launched by the Ministry for Human Resource Development called Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) in 1992. The objective of the scheme is to provide educational opportunities for children with disabilities in ordinary schools, so as to facilitate their retention in the school system. This scheme offers financial assistance towards the salary of special teachers, provision of aids and appliances for children with special needs, training of special teachers, removal of difficulties due to building design, provision of instructional materials, community mobilization, and early detection and resource support.

It should be noted that no state government has state-sponsored schemes specifically for inclusive education. However, state governments sustain some components such as salaries of resource teachers in IEDC projects. IEDC has the scope for pre-school training of children with disabilities and counselling for parents, and 100 per cent financial assistance can be provided for education of these children. The launching of IEDC led to a focus on pedagogical approaches that respond to the needs of children with disabilities. Under IEDC, over 120,000 children with disabilities are being educated in over 24,000 mainstream schools.

An evaluation of the project in 1994 showed that not only had enrolment of disabled children increased considerably, but the retention rate of disabled children had also increased, and was higher than that of normal children. It created greater awareness in ordinary schools about education of children with disabilities. General teachers acknowledged that working with children...
with disabilities helped them in becoming better educators.

CBR Network (2001) also carried out a review with a view to scale up the educational access of children with disabilities in the state of Karnataka. The study reveals that the IEDC programme implemented by the government and NGOs had vast discrepancies in terms of teacher training and quality of services. Training programmes have been reduced from one year to 45 days or shorter periods. These training programmes or skills development programmes for general teachers and for resource teachers lack clarity. The short-term training curriculum to train general teachers varies from state to state in terms of objectives, content, duration and methodology. There also exists confusion about whether IEDC needs single-category disability teachers or multi-category resource teachers. Presently, the government recognizes both these programmes, and no policy exists on the roles and responsibilities of teachers at different levels. The IEDC implemented by NGOs uses a different pattern in comparison to IEDC implemented by the government. Discrepancies in teacher preparation are certainly an area of major concern. There is a need for adequate preparation of general teachers, textbooks, and learning materials based on inclusive education principles.

The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) acknowledges that there is lack of clarity at different levels in understanding regarding inclusive education in the Indian context, and an urgent need to evolve operational frameworks for the planning and management of inclusive education. Although long overdue, recent efforts have been made by NCERT to evolve a framework in collaboration with NGOs who have initiated successful practices in inclusive education.

Verma (2002) reported in an evaluation of IEDC in both DPEP and non-DPEP districts that ‘IEDC needs to be redesigned on the lines of inclusive education for maximum reach and impact. The IEDC model used in DPEP districts has not gone beyond identification, and providing aids and appliances.’

**District Primary Education Project (DPEP):**

The government launched the DPEP with support from the World Bank. DPEP is converging with IEDC and other government and NGO programmes to bring synergy in the process of including more children with disabilities into the regular school system. It focuses on in-service training of general teachers to enable early detection, assessment, use of aids, and making of individual educational plans. Although DPEP was initiated in 1994, integrated education for children with disabilities was formally added as a programme component in 1997. The programme covers 60 per cent of the child population of the country, and spreads over 176 districts in 15 states. Initially, states were provided with assistance to prepare action plans. By 1998, many states had carried out surveys and formal assessment camps, and had evolved strategies to provide resource support to children with special needs.

The 15 states where DPEP is being implemented have made encouraging efforts by developing appropriate infrastructure, and by selecting consultants, State Project Committees, District Resource Groups, and IEDC coordinators at the State Project Office and District Project Offices. Through a massive civil construction drive, over 200,000 new schools have been built. This has helped in increasing the enrolment of children in school and the promotion of adult literacy, which is also a DPEP objective.

Quality improvement is the cornerstone of DPEP, and focus is on ensuring improvements in classroom processes. All teachers receive in-service training through a massive training drive promoted by individual states. Quality improvement is also being attempted through renewal of curriculum and teaching–learning materials, provision of decentralized academic support, and capacity building of institutions. DPEP supports community mobilization and early detection of disabilities, and it emphasizes development of skills and competencies amongst teachers. It has built on resource support at the field level, and stressed the development of innovative designs for primary schools, and provisions for educational aids and appliances.

**District Rehabilitation Centres and National Programme for Rehabilitation for Persons with Disability (NPRPD):**

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has set up 11 District Rehabilitation Centres in 10 states—Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Haryana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka. A similar scheme called the National Programme for Rehabilitation for Persons with Disability (NPRPD) was launched in 1999. Under the scheme, financial resources are provided to state governments for initiating services at the district level. The government is using community-based rehabilitation as a strategy to scale up basic rehabilitation services, and to create a process for empowering people with disabilities, their families and communities. Within the scheme, the system of delivery of rehabilitation services is established from grassroots to the state level as follows.

- Each gram panchayat will have two community-based rehabilitation workers—for promoting community-based rehabilitation of people with disabilities, especially prevention, early detection and intervention.
Each block will have two multipurpose rehabilitation workers—for providing basic rehabilitation services, and for coordinating activities with other government agencies.

There is a District Referral and Training Centre—for providing comprehensive rehabilitation services to people with disabilities covering all categories.

There is a State Resource Centre—to serve as the state-level apex institution for training and human resources development, and providing rehabilitation services including those referred to it from lower levels.

UN Support to Primary Education: Community School Programme:
The Community School Programme is a unique multi-state, multi-agency initiative. UN organizations—UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO and ILO—are participating in the programme with five nodal ministries and nine state departments. The programme is a vehicle for channelling UN support for ongoing efforts towards UEE by helping to enhance and sustain community participation in effective school management and the protection of child rights. Support is being provided for improving the performance of teachers in the use of interactive, child-centred and gender-sensitive methods of teaching in multi-grade classrooms, and to redressing social constraints that affect attendance and performance of school-aged children, mainly girls. The focus is on addressing the educational needs of working children, children with disabilities, and adolescent girls. The states participating in this programme include Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The interventions suggested for integrated education of disabled children are early detection and identification, functional and formal assessment, educational placement, aids and appliances, support services, teacher training, resource support, parental training and community mobilization, planning and management, strengthening of special schools, removal of architectural barriers, research, monitoring and evaluation, and a special focus on girls with disabilities. The provision of Rs 1200 per challenged child per year made under SSA may not suffice, if all the interventions are to be supported. Therefore, the Union Secretary (Elementary Education and Literacy) convened a meeting of those departments/agencies of the government, who have stake in integrated education of disabled children, for seeking support and exploring the possibility of convergence of their efforts with SSA to achieve a common objective.

Conclusion

It is realized that the methods adopted so far may not be enough to achieve education for all within the next few years. This perspective must guide future policies and programmes. Efforts should focus on three broad areas such as the national resolve, as stipulated in the NPE, to provide free and compulsory education of satisfactory quality to all children up to the age of 14 years, the political commitment to make the right to elementary education a fundamental right, and to enforce this right through statutory measures and Greater decentralization, as provided for by the seventy-third and seventy-fourth constitutional amendments, and a significantly enhanced role for local bodies and community organizations in efforts towards UEE. Future government policy should deal specifically with the question of equity. One way to achieve this is by fulfilling the educational needs of disadvantaged children. This shift in policy would require additional training facilities and governmental support for infrastructure development. Local government can be drawn on initially. Under SSA, there is a need for the government to evolve a clear operational framework on inclusive education and special needs in order to achieve meaningful results. The school system must change to enable it to respond to the educational needs of the disabled. For this reason, a changed curriculum that all children can follow should be developed. Teacher education reform should be undertaken to equip mainstream teachers with appropriate knowledge and skills.
Lastly, attention should be drawn to the building of appropriate support systems.

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