



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA: THE NEED FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

¹Ms. Anisha. J, ²Dr. J. S. Gunavathy

¹Ph.D. Scholar, ²Associate Professor

^{1,2}Department of Social Work (Aided),

^{1,2}Madras School of Social Work, Chennai, India

Abstract: Inclusive education of children with disabilities has been the buzzword for the past few decades. In order to achieve inclusive education, it is essential to understand the ground level realities and the most effective ways to address them. This conceptual paper seeks to map the journey of education for children with disabilities and trace the Indian policies for inclusive education. The paper also showcases the various challenges faced by India in terms of inclusive education of children with disabilities and discusses the role of social workers in school settings towards inclusive education.

Index Terms - Inclusive education, children with disabilities, school social workers, India

I. INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF (n.d.), “disability is considered as one of the prominent barriers to education.” Education of children with disabilities (CwDs) has not always been viewed through an inclusive lens, rather CwDs have historically been denied education. Education for CwDs has progressed from denial to special education, integrated education, and inclusive education (Banks & Polack, 2014; Somaiah, 2009).

II. JOURNEY OF EDUCATION FOR CWDs

Institutionalised education for the CwDs started way back in the 18th century when Valentin Haüy also called as the ‘father and apostle of the blind’ started a school for children with visual impairment in 1784. Later in 1960, the first ever school for children with hearing impairment was started by Thomas Braidwood in England (Magner, n.d.). This was the beginning of special education for CwDs. Britannica (2013) defines special education as “the education of children who differ socially, mentally, or physically from the average to such an extent that they require modifications of usual school practices. Special education serves children with emotional, behavioural, or cognitive impairments or with intellectual, hearing, vision, speech, or learning disabilities; gifted children with advanced academic abilities; and children with orthopaedic or neurological impairments”. In the late 19th century, England enacted the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf) Children Act 1893, its very first legislation for special education. The United States of America passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in 1975. Several other countries created legislations to ensure education for CwDs. Though special education was a huge step towards educating the disabled, it had its own limitations. Since these children had to study separately, they were deprived of opportunities to socialise with other children, which lead to further exclusion. The cost of education at these schools also were high (Mattingly & McInerney, 2010).

Integrated education was the next approach that was introduced towards the education of CwDs. Integrated education is “the process of bringing children with disabilities into the mainstream school, and placing most of the focus on the individual rather than on the school system”. One major drawback of this approach was that the child was being blamed for any problem caused (WHO, 2010). It was the child who

had to adapt to the school and not vice versa. Mattingly & McInerney (2010) noted that there was a lack in resources to meet the learning needs of all the children in the system of integrated education.

Followed by the World Conference on Education for All, 1990, UNESCO held the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality in 1994 where it adopted the “Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action”. Ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations were signatories to this statement, adopted in Salamanca, Spain. The Statement put forth the benefits of an inclusive school, a school where the special educational needs would be met along with social integration. The responsibility was not on the child or teacher anymore but on the community as a whole to make the school inclusive (UNESCO, 1994). According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education is “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”. In accordance with the Salamanca Statement, many countries directed their educational policies and practices towards inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2019). Later in 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its Optional Protocol in New York. Article 24 of the UNCRPD states that CwDs shouldn't be discriminated and excluded but should rather be provided with inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education in the same manner as typically developed children (UN, 2006).

III. INDIA'S JOURNEY TOWARD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The first school for CwDs was established even before India got its independence from the British. It was the Bombay Institute of Deaf & Mute, started by a Roman Catholic Archbishop in 1884 at Mazagaon, Maharashtra (RCI, 2000). The first school for the children with visual impairment was instituted by Annie Sharp, a British Christian missionary, at Amritsar in 1887 which was later relocated to Dehradun and named as the ‘Sharp Memorial School for the Blind (Punani & Rawal, 1993). Pandey & Advani (1997, as cited in Sharma, 2005) recorded that the number of special schools for CwDs grew up to 1200 in 1991.

Post-independence, when the Constitution of India was framed, it guaranteed non-discrimination, equality, education and more such rights for every citizen of India including persons with disabilities. Article 45 requires the states to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years. The states are also required to provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years, as per Article 21A (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

When the global need for integrated education was felt, India also brought forth the Integrated Education of Disabled Children Scheme in 1974. The objectives of the scheme were to provide educational opportunities for the disabled children in common schools, to facilitate their retention in the school system and to place in common schools such children already placed in special schools after they acquire the communication and daily living skills at the functional level (Singh & Dash, 2006). When it was understood that mere integration is not enough to provide quality education and right environment for CwDs, the idea of inclusion started to emerge in the picture.

After India becoming a signatory to the Salamanca Statement in 1994, policies and schemes had a shift of focus towards inclusion. The Government of India implemented schemes and rolled out several policies and programmes for inclusive education (IE). In 2005, the Ministry of Education (formerly known as the Ministry of Human Resource Development), Government of India established ‘The National Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities’ with the goal “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” (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2016), Government of India. Later in 2009, ‘Inclusive Education for the Disabled at Secondary Stage’ scheme was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Government of India with the aim to “enable all students with disabilities completing eight years of elementary schooling an opportunity to complete four years of secondary schooling (classes IX to XII) in an inclusive and enabling environment, provide educational opportunities and facilities to students with disabilities in the general education system at the secondary level (classes IX to XII) and support the training of general school teachers to meet the needs of children with disabilities at the secondary level” (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2016). The ‘Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan’ scheme was subsequently launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Education in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 – Quality Education. The aim of the

scheme is “to ensure that all children have access to quality education with an equitable and inclusive classroom environment which take care of their diverse background, multilingual needs, different academic abilities and make them active participants in the learning process” (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2020). The most recent policy for IE is the ‘National Education Policy’ introduced in 2020 with the vision to build “an education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India, that is Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, by providing high-quality education to all, and thereby making India a global knowledge superpower” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

The two social legislations that relate to inclusive education of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) including CwDs in India are The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and The Right to Education Act, 2009. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 was enacted in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006 (UN, 2006) and replaced erstwhile the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 defines IE as ‘a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities’ (see 2(m) of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016). The Act also brings 21 conditions such as physical disability (including locomotor disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and speech & language disability), intellectual disability (including specific learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder), mental behaviour, disability caused due to chronic neurological conditions and blood disorder and multiple disabilities under the ambit of the term ‘disability’ (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). The Right to Education Act, 2009 emphasises on free and compulsory education of all children from 6 to 14 years. These two Acts assures the rights of CwDs in education..

IV. CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA

As global countries strive to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, India on its part has been making steady progress and currently ranks 94th out of the 169 countries. Among the 17 goals, India continues to face challenges with the fourth goal, “Quality Education”, which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Sachs et al., 2026; UN, 2015). In India, the very education of CwDs is faced with complex challenges that demand significant attention. Data points out that only 51.9% of students who enter class one tend to complete class ten which indicates high dropout rates before the completion of secondary school. Further, the enrolment of CwDs in schools is significantly low, prevailing at just 0.89% of the total school enrolment (Department of School Education & Literacy, 2026). The challenges that India faces are at the home, school, community and government levels. The most common challenges are negative attitudes towards inclusive education, lack of trained teachers, teacher anxiety, large class sizes fear of downfall of academic achievement, admission policy of the school, poor infrastructure, financial limitations (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014) and improper execution of policies (Bhat & Geelani, 2017). All of these affects CwDs which hinders them from stepping into regular schools.

V. SCOPE FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

The role of the social work profession in the school setting has been gaining momentum over the years, globally. Ensuring the provision of equitable educational opportunities and ensuring the mental, physical and emotional presence in the classroom are covered under the scope of school social work (NASW, 2012). School social workers have also been recognised by developed countries like the United States of America, China and Canada for playing varied roles for the inclusion of CwDs at the school level (Asamoah et al., 2021). Social work intervention at the school level is much needed to overcome the challenges of inclusive education in India.

In the case of India, school social work is in its nascent stage, hence making it difficult to involve school social workers for the implementation of inclusive education. However, the National Education Policy (2020) does provide a detailed framework for the integration of school social workers as part of the larger inclusive education initiative. This policy emphasizes the important role of social workers as integral members of the educational team, with the competencies and expertise necessary to address the needs of a diverse student population. School social workers will be key in identifying and addressing the specific needs of students by advocating for inclusive practices, thereby providing equal opportunities for all

learners. Their role will be much more than support, creating a culture in which every student feels valued and empowered to succeed. Social workers will partner with educators, parents and other stakeholders to design tailored educational strategies that promote understanding, acceptance and inclusion in schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

Addressing challenges with regard to inclusive education of CwDs in India requires a multifaceted approach that involves contributions from different stakeholders such as parents, teachers, school management, school social workers, the community and the government. Focusing on initiatives to increase the enrolment of CwDs, the promotion of teacher training programs focused on inclusive education and the involvement of school social workers will together ensure the implementation of inclusive education. By working on these areas, India can create a more inclusive and equitable education system that supports the inclusion of CwDs.

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