School Teachers Experiences and Perceptions regarding Barriers to Inclusive Education and Possible Solutions to address them w.r.t Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

Inclusive education has gained grounds significantly since its inception in 1994, as the Salamanca Declaration widely endorsed that "all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have". In the Indian context, several key legislations like Right to Education Act (2009), the Rights of persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly advocate inclusive education as the way forward for education in India at all levels. Research evidence indicates that it is possible to remove barriers and build inclusive societies where children with disabilities can participate as equal members in the society and society can mutually benefit from this inclusion, rather than segregation. However, despite several legislations advocating inclusive education and research evidence where inclusive education is beneficial for society, disparities remain in implementing inclusive education. This study is an attempt to understand the experiences and perceptions of school stakeholders (teachers) in Delhi Government schools under Directorate of Education, regarding challenges that pose as barriers for inclusive education for children with disabilities and ways to address the same. This research employed a qualitative research methodology using the narrative inquiry through interviews and focus-group discussions to arrive at the findings. The implications of the study are also discussed as part of the research.

Key words: inclusive education, children with disabilities, challenges, barriers, way forward

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Introduction

Inclusive education is feted as a signature outcome of the Salamanca Declaration (1994) that resulted globally in adapted learning environments. In the Indian context, attempts at inclusion began as early as 1974 with the education of students with orthopaedic impairments in regular schools as part of the Integrated Education for the Disabled Scheme (IEDC). The Kothari Commission (1964-66) recommended the education of children with motor handicaps along with regular children. In terms of current provisions of law and policy, there are six special legislations relating to the disabled persons and their rights in India which have been enacted by the Union government: the Mental Health Act (1987), Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), The Persons with disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 or in short form PWD Act (now revamped), the National Trust for

Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities,(2006) , National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Rights of Persons with disabilities Act (2016). However, prior to the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), it was the PWD Act (1995) that catered to substantial provisions for the education of the disabled, among the Acts mentioned above (Pandey 2005 cited by Islam (2017)). However, the new legislation on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) clearly articulates the rights of the disabled in the country and positions India to one of those countries with clear articulated policy for persons with disabilities. With the passage of Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009 and its subsequent amendments in 2012, mainstream schools have opened its doors to inclusion, spearheading the process of inclusive education for children with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) also mentions that States (here countries globally) ensure an "inclusive education system at all levels" and there is strong international evidence that with appropriate support, children with disabilities can thrive in an inclusive setting. Moreover, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places a strong emphasis on inclusive education, ensuring every child has access to quality education, irrespective of the educational background of the child.

The 8th (AISES, NCERT, 2016) place the statistics for children with disabilities at 8,35, 287 for differently abled students enrolled in 55,574 schools which comprise 22,192 (39.93 %) primary; 10,730 (19.30 %) upper primary; 16,054 (28.89 %) secondary and 6,598 (11.87 %) higher secondary schools. This reflects the abysmal penetration of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Hence, this study was undertaken to understand the challenges faced by teachers in facilitating inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Definition of Key-terms

Children with special needs may be referred to as: children with disabilities, exceptional child or differently-abled. However, current terminology worldwide is to be sensitive of using vocabulary, hurtful or negative to children with special needs.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

What were the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive schools in facilitating inclusive education for children with disabilities? What may be few possible strategies for effective inclusion for addressing the barriers for children with disabilities from the experiences and perspectives of teachers?

The following included the objectives of the study:

1. *To study the experiences and perspectives of teachers regarding barriers faced pertaining to inclusive education for children with disabilities*
2. *To study the experiences and perspectives of teachers regarding possible ways to address the barriers to inclusive education for children with disabilities*

Methodology

Being a qualitative study using the narrative approach the experiences and perceptions of teachers teaching in inclusive classrooms, in inclusive learning environments and in the process the challenges faced were accounted for by carrying out interviews and focus-group discussions.

The *description of sample* is depicted in **Table 1**

Sl No.	Sample	Sample size
1	*Schools* (South-east district Delhi, under Directorate of Education)	*04*
2	*Teachers* (from each school)	04 = 4 * 4 = 16 (N)

Table 1: Description of Sample

Schools: 04 Fully-funded government schools from South-east district of Delhi was randomly selected as inclusive education is mandated by RTE Act, 2009. Only general classroom teachers in whose classes CWSN were studying, formed part of the study. The teachers were selected on purposive basis. Special education teachers were not a part of the study as the aim was to understand barriers to inclusive education from experiences and perceptions of general teachers. In this study, teachers were teaching in upper primary (class VI-VII) in government schools as those classrooms which had a presence of CWSN learners were considered on purposive basis.

Interviews and focus -group discussions were used to collect data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with teachers after taking proper appointment, The "access" to teachers from the 04 schools was through "gate-keepers" (colleagues from professional practice) and the teachers formed the "key informants" of the study. The methodology of data collection and analysis of the data was "iterative" and where thin descriptions of data was revealed, the researcher visited the field again for "data completeness" and "genuineness" (Silverman, 2012). Being a qualitative study "triangulation" was carried out through "Respondent Validation (Creswell, 2014) where focus-group discussion was done to gather deeper insights from the field. (03) focus-group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in total: 01 in each school to understand the "social realities" (Creswell, 2014) of the practice of inclusive education for children with disabilities. The average time of each FGD consisted of around 40 -45 minutes. 16 teachers consisted the sample size for interview: 04 from each school. For the FGD, teachers who were a part of the interview were randomly selected. In some schools, (03) teachers and in some schools (04) teachers were a part of FGD. The FGD was conducted during the recess and in slots after school hours.

Ethical considerations of the study

Tacit consent (Remler & Ryzin, 2008) consisted the informed consent among the study participants**.** The participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study and that the data would be used for research purpose only. Confidentiality of participants was also taken care of "Respondent Validation" was also carried out for credibility of findings and as data triangulation.

Results and Findings

Based on the analysis of data, the following findings emerged as reflected under the broad themes:

- **Barriers to inclusive education**
- **Possible ways to address these barriers**

The interview responses of the 16 teachers and the focus -group discussion analysis has been clubbed together to arrive at the findings.

Barriers to Inclusion

Lack of understanding of the concepts related to disability and inclusion

School Stakeholders, especially Heads of school, classroom teachers lack of understanding of the terms like "disability", "integration" and "Children with Special Needs". On further probing, the responses indicated that stakeholders (the teachers and Heads of Schools) lacked clarity in understanding about "disability" as an "impairment" or "difference between physical and mental loss". Moreover, "CWSN" and "children with disabilities" was "confusing" to most of the respondents.

Taken for granted

The responses also revealed that "children with special needs (CWSN) are not "provided in inclusive schools what regular learners get for granted. i.e. access to games and sports, access to a school curriculum that is CWSN -friendly etc.

Extra involvement of teachers and demands on their time

CWSN need more time and effort, especially CWSN with intellectual impairments, on the part of the classroom teacher.

Training needs of teachers

Lack of training of teachers in effective use of strategies and maintaining records. CWSN with diverse impairments / disabilities have diverse needs. "How to deal with different challenges depends on context-bound solutions" was the refrain used by teachers to describe the inclusive classroom scenario. It was also revealed that "the type of training given to general classroom teachers on how to maintain CWSN portfolios of work samples etc. is abysmally low. The classroom teacher "manages to maintain just routine records of the learners with special needs".

However, teachers also revealed that training is provided by NCERT, SCERT from time to time of inclusive education but such trainings are to "be relevant to classroom handling where CWSN are placed".

Different schools practice inclusion differently

One of the most revealing findings was that schools were in various stages of implementing inclusive education and different schools practice it differently. While the issue of "quality education to every child is not new" (all policy documents on inclusive education whether international or within India emphasize quality and equity in inclusive education. The above response indicated that the contextualization of quality in different inclusive settings with different strategies needed for the specific problems of every learner is still "new " as revealed by majority of the teacher's responses.

Another barrier as revealed through the data analysis is that "even if classroom teachers try and use some strategies for handling CWSN learners but generalizations are difficult beyond the context of the individual CWSN learner" and "results may be relevant locally but difficult to generalize".

Lack of understanding of aids and assistive devices used by CWSN

In terms of Aids and Assistive devices used by CWSN, schoolteachers remain unaware of the names of what types of assistive devices are available. Few teachers mentioned hearing aids, crutches and magnifying glass used by CWSN" but assistive devices in the area of special needs education remain unknown to majority of teachers.

Meagre access and participation in sports by CWSN

Moreover, in terms of access and participation in sports and games by CWSN, the responses revealed that "schools lacked playgrounds" and "sports kits, equipment" for CWSN. It was also revealed that "teachers lacked knowledge about the kinds of activities and games" that may be organized by teachers for children with disabilities. Physical fitness and health is a primary concern for all individuals, irrespective of ages and conditions of disability, unless otherwise specified by medical practitioners. But in the sampled schools the teachers were oblivious to the kind of games and activities that may be organized for CWSN. Innovation and creativity are emphasized in all matters of a student's academic journey for a holistic growth and development of a child. However, such a mindset and practice seems to be missing in the schools.

Lack of guidance facilities regarding vocational educational and development

Evidences are lacking regarding vocational education and development of CWSN learners and absence of guidance facilities pertaining to their future areas of work - related career or entrepreneurship. Most of the policy documents highlight the vocational component of engaging CWSN but such practices were lacking in the sampled schools.

School-parental collaboration/ involvement in curriculum design

 Although schools and parents have mechanisms in place for mutual involvement based on schools' open=door policy perspective, however, a meaningful and planned collaboration is lacking. While designing Individualized education Plans (IEPs), parental involvement and collaboration are paramount for a child's holistic development as emphasized by inclusive education experts. However, the evidence of such practice in the sampled schools was lacking. In the sampled schools the school-parental collaboration was "limited to parental responses to school-initiated information about scholarships and meetings". It may be inferred that schools and parents of CWSN learners have limited involvement in the academic journey of CWSN's life in inclusive settings.

However, it was revealed that the weakest link perhaps to inclusive education was the teacher compliance, especially newly appointed special education teachers (SETs) to respective authorities in terms of the work pressure and forms related to CWSN entries.

Teaching-learning process

The responses of the teachers revealed that "during teaching-learning process, in classrooms, problems often appeared during attempts to assess CWSNs' current level of performance vis-à-vis the content to be transacted. The IEPs designed were a form of formal institutional template. Moreover, according to the types and categories of CWSN learners, the strategies to be used in classrooms for effective learning instruction for both (regular students and CWSN) was limited on the part of general classroom teachers. During focus -group discussion it was revealed that "due to lack of specialized training skill in using diverse strategies for teaching diverse types of CWSN" the teaching-learning process was faced with limitations.

Teachers experiences and perceptions regarding possible ways to address the barriers

The clubbed responses indicated the following sub-themes:

Willingness of general classroom teachers

Willingness of general classroom teachers to include" CWSN learners in their classroom and in general the school stakeholders (Principals/ Heads of school/ parents and non-disabled peers) attitude to morally support inclusion.

Family involvement

Family involvement is crucial to success for meaningful inclusion. Alur (2011) note "mother;s and family participation emerge as key factors (p.140).

Cross -disability Training and teacher preparation programmes

Teachers also have to have some kind of familiarity in cross-disability skill set for handling inclusive classrooms. Minimum basic Braille and functional sign language need to be a part of teacher-training programmes.

Community involvement

Creating a pool of resource persons involved with disability issues at the school and community level. The *Bhagidari scheme of government may be utilized to create a pool of like-minded individuals* in any cluster, zone to enhance the participation of community stakeholders towards inclusion.

School Development Plans and collaboration

The RTE Act, 2009 mandates the formulation of school development plans (SDPs) by School Management committees. (SMCs). Schools should plan SDPs so that all school activities that need to be in place for CWSN for CWSN readiness for e.g. social mapping in the community for CWSN count, school mapping of existing facilities, future requirements in terms of CWSN resource supports, services planned for unique CWSN requirements (speech pathologist, occupational therapists, different para-medical professionals etc, can be put up on demand in SDP for timely address by respective authorities for collaboration with different service providers may be channelized.

Discussion

The study is a reflection of the interim performance of the government pertaining to what facilitates inclusion and also signposts barriers towards inclusive education. The study findings reveal that different schools practice inclusion differently and general classroom teachers need to keep a "CWSN-friendly mind-set" in schools to accommodate and welcome all learners in classrooms, irrespective of disability. Schools do not undertake the SDP exercises, as a consequence planning for teacher training to upgrade their skills and familiarize them with the use of new teaching-learning materials, inclusive-friendly classroom practices for which demand must be made in SDP are lacking. Training is provided by NCERT, SCERTs etc. regarding inclusive education and its unique requirements but each schools' readiness / initiative CWSN inclusion is implemented differently. Here, Universal Design for learning principles may provide support for arriving at common grounds so that the multiple means of representation, engagement and expression of CWSN learners may be met. The above findings are also corroborated by the (Singhal, 2005; Singh 2011).

Implications

The results of the study may help schools to plan out the physical engagement of CWSN learners and plan out activities for games and sports for participation of CWSN learners.

Training needs and School Development plans may be panned out to benefit fruitful inclusion in all schools where it is the right of every learner to equal, equitable and full participation in all school activities and programme.

School-parental collaboration needs to be planned meaningfully to benefit all stakeholders involved as educating CWSN productively is in itself, creating a productive society, where it benefits all learners.

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