

Curricular issues and teaching practices for children with special educational needs

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Key Words : Children, Educational needs, Teaching practices

INTRODUCTION

Education is a powerful instrument of social change, and often initiates upward movement in the social structure. Thereby, helping to bridge the gap between the different sections of society. The educational scene in the country has undergone major change over the years, resulting in better provision of education and better educational practices. In 1944, the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) published a comprehensive report called the Sergeant Report on the post-war educational development of the country. As per the report, provisions for the education of the handicapped, were to form an essential part of the national system of education, which was to be administered by the Education Department. According to this report, handicapped children were to be sent to special schools only when the nature and extent of their defects made this necessary. The Kothari Commission (1964–66), the first education commission of independent India, observed: “the education of the handicapped children should be an inseparable part of the education system.” The commission recommended experimentation with integrated programmes in order to bring as many children as possible into these programmes (Alur, 2002).

The government’s agenda to universalize elementary education, and its commitment to the Directive Principles of the Constitution, are guided by the recognition that a new universal system of education should be based on equity, the redressal of past imbalances, and the provision of access to quality education, especially for marginalized groups. Recent educational developments and the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Constitutional Amendments outline the possibility of entrusting basic education to the local elected bodies in towns and villages. This would allow for community participation in education at the elementary level and would introduce radical change, leading to the empowerment of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Until the 1970s, the policy encouraged segregation. Most educators believed that children with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities were so different that they could not participate

Cite this Article: Rastogi, Alka and Srivastava, Gyan Prakash (2014). Curricular issues and teaching practices for children with special educational needs. *Internat. J. Appl. Home Sci.*, **1** (1 - 3) : 79-85.

in the activities of a common school (Advani, 2002). Christian missionaries, in the 1880s, started schools for the disabled as charitable undertakings (Mehta, 1982). The first school for the blind was established in 1887. An institute for the deaf and mute, was set up in 1888. Services for the physically disabled were also initiated in the middle of the twentieth century. Individuals with mental retardation were the last to receive attention. The first school for the mentally challenged being established in 1934 (Mishra, 2000). Special education programmes in earlier times were, therefore, heavily dependent on voluntary initiative.

The government's (Department of Education) initiatives after independence were manifested in the establishment of a few workshop units meant primarily for blind adults (Luthra, 1974). These units later included people who were deaf, physically impaired, and mentally retarded (Rohindekar and Usha, 1988). While some provisions existed in the States, it was considered the best course to assist and encourage voluntary organizations already working in the field. The welfare approach continued in government programmes. Support was provided to voluntary organizations for the establishment of model schools for the blind, the deaf, and the mentally retarded. The government set up the National Library for the Blind, the Central Braille Press, and employment exchanges for the disabled. It also made provisions for scholarships, for prevention and early identification of disabling conditions, for the development of functional skills, and for aids and appliances for the disabled.

Curricular issues and concerns :

To make inclusive education possible, and to better accommodate students with different learning abilities, the present education system, educational structure, and educational practices need to become more flexible, more inclusive, and more collaborative.

The purpose :

The purpose of inclusive education :

- Is NOT the same as for a student without SEN—that is, it IS NOT to bring students with SEN up to the level of, or maintain their grades at the same level as, students without SEN.
- It IS to meet the individualized goals of students with SEN, within the context of general educational settings and activities. The following questions need to be addressed while making adaptations to the curriculum.

Can a student with SEN participate in the classroom?

- Just like his/her classmates?
- With environmental adaptations?
- With instructional adaptations?
- With adapted materials?
- With adapted expectations?

Emerging issues and curricular concerns :

The following curricular issues and concerns have emerged within the Focus Group as a result of in-depth discussion and analysis of the existing scenario.

- Making all options of education, such as, open schools, regular schools, special schools, non-formal and alternative education systems, available to all children including

children with disabilities.

- Developing strategies for meeting the educational needs of learners with disabilities in large classrooms.
- Developing national support systems.
- Understanding the significance of early identification and intervention.
- Emphasizing good teaching–learning practices.
- Making the curriculum flexible and accessible.
- Utilizing technology and assistive devices.
- Developing appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures.
- Capacity building and empowering teachers and stakeholders.
- Providing vocational education.
- Identifying suitable sports and other co-curricular activities for optimal development of learners with SEN.
- Barrier-free intervention/educational environment (including attitudinal barriers).

Planning and managing an inclusive curriculum in schools :

Developing inclusive schools that cater to a wide range of pupils in both urban and rural areas requires: the articulation of a clear and forceful policy on inclusion together with adequate financial provision; an effective public information effort to combat prejudice and create informed and positive attitudes; an extensive programme of orientation and staff training and the provision of necessary support services.

An inclusive curriculum means one curriculum for all students rather than a separate curriculum for students without SEN and another for student with SEN. According to Quinn and Ryba (2000) an inclusive curriculum is recognition that under the principle of social justice, participation in education should not involve discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, indigenous group, socio-economic status, and ability or disability. An inclusive curriculum, recognizes the need that schools be organized, with the individual differences of students in mind and allow for scope and flexibility to enable all students to achieve their goals. Though the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2000) (NCERT, 2000), does mention the education of learners with SEN under the sections “Curriculum Concerns” and “Managing the System”, it does not address the SEN of learners under various other sections, such as, “Organization of Curriculum at Elementary and Secondary Stages”, “Organization of Curriculum at Higher Secondary Stage”, “Evaluation”, etc.

It is believed that the fundamental right to education will bring more pupils with SEN into ordinary schools, and that this will provide the impetus for change. As stated this will require a number of innovations in teaching–learning processes and will also provide pupils with SEN access to a full curriculum in appropriate ways. To facilitate this access, it is important to provide information in Braille, on tape, through sign language, and in simple and straightforward language. Access to the content of the curriculum is further highlighted later in this paper.

Teaching practices :

In India, the concept of Inclusive Education has not yet been linked to a broader discussion of pedagogy (Anita, 2000) and quality education (Taneja, 2001). Any broad reform in education cannot be implemented without taking the inclusion of learners with SEN into consideration.

There are many teachers all over the country who do make small modifications in their teaching in accordance with the principles of inclusive education. The strategies used by them are: group learning, peer tutoring, speaking slowly and clearly, looking at the hearing-impaired child while speaking so that they can lip read, writing on the blackboard, etc. Most teachers are aware of such techniques for classroom management of learners with SEN. In this connection, they often consult the special educator for support.

An extensive review of research on learner and teacher characteristics (Cronbach and Snow, 1977) concluded that children with difficulties in learning need a mixture of teaching approaches with a bias towards fairly structured methods. Krishnaswamy and Shankar (2003), point towards differentiated instruction as an approach for the teacher to weave individual goals into the classroom content and instructional strategies. Valmiki (2003) emphasises culture specific pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching as major initiatives in making education culturally inclusive. Mani and Mulharah (2003) have talked about creating effective classrooms through cooperative learning. According to Malhotra (2003) teachers should be provided flexible syllabi, which would give them more time and freedom.

Work over the last decade has endeavored to identify specific sub-groups of specific learning difficulties, and there is evidence that it may be valid to distinguish between children with language, visual-spatial, or “mixed processing deficits” (Tyler, 1990). However, even if we could make these kinds of distinctions with certainty, there remains the question of how best one can teach these various groups of children. As yet there are no unequivocally “best” methods. Careful monitoring of the child’s learning and the encouragement of a broad range of learning strategies remain important characteristics of effective teaching for all children. Lewis (1991) has stated: “In teaching, effective teachers adjust their styles to individual learners.” She highlighted the importance of focusing on topics, which match the child’s interest level for planning parallel tasks of similar difficulty for different interests (for example, matching teacher’s questions with children’s cognition levels), varying the presentation of activity, and varying children’s modes of responses (for example, oral instead of written). Evans (1997), giving a description of the theoretical elements and assumptions related to structuring the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties points out that since learning is a social process and involves the structuring of knowledge, it calls for the teacher’s mediation between the child and the environment.

The SEN may emanate from a number of reasons. In this paper we concentrate on SEN stemming from disability conditions. Not all children with disabilities have SEN at the elementary level. They learn along with their peers with the help of aids such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, optical or non-optical aids, educational aids like Taylor frames, the abacus, etc. However, there may be students who may require the following:

- Additional time and a suitable mode for the successful completion of tests.
- Modification, substitution, and disapplication of the curriculum because it presents specific difficulties for them.

- Provision of adapted, modified, or alternative activities in different content areas.
- Accessible texts and materials to suit their ages and levels of learning;
- Appropriate management of classrooms (for example, management of noise, glare, etc.)
- Provision of additional support by using ICT or video.

The following are the major recommendations of this Focus Group.

- Make all early education and care programmes (from 0–6 years) sensitive and responsive to the special needs of children, including training of Anganwadi workers in identification of needs of the children with disabilities, use of age-appropriate play and learning materials and the counselling of parents.
- Make all schools inclusive by:
 - Enforcing without exception the neighbourhood school policy
 - Removing physical barriers
 - Reviewing barriers created by admission procedures (screening, identification, parental interaction, selection and evaluation), this should include private schools
 - Building the capacity of teachers to function in an inclusive setting
 - Making the curriculum flexible and appropriate to accommodate the diversity of school children including those with disability in both cognitive and non-cognitive areas
 - Making support services available in the form of technology (including ICT), teaching–learning materials and specialists
 - Involving parents, family, and the community at all stages of education
- Gear all teacher education programmes (both pre-service and in-service) to developing the pedagogical skills required in inclusive classrooms.
- Correlate the style of teaching to the learning styles of all children.
- Mobilize special schools as resource centers that provide support to inclusive schools.
- Develop partnerships with institutions of higher learning, governmental organizations, and NGOs to promote participation of children with disabilities in all aspects of education.
- Reduce class size to a maximum of 30 students and a maximum of 20 in case the class includes children with SEN.
- Make the class teacher responsible for all the children in the class. In case special support is required on account of SEN, this should be in the form of assistance to the class teacher.
- Regard all special teachers in a given school as full-fledged members of the school community.
- Make all curriculum-related policies and programmes inclusive in nature to effectively address issues related to the education of children with SEN.
- Develop perspective and skills in all administrators, including school principals, for planning and executing programmes based on the philosophy of inclusion.
- Develop strengths and abilities of all children rather than highlighting limitations.
- Recognizing diversity among learners, the medium of instruction should include sign language for children with hearing impairment, and Braille for children with visual

impairment. At the same time as an optional subject/third language, learning of sign language, Braille, finger Braille, etc. should be introduced for all children.

- To promote self-reliance and enable children to acquire coping skills, the emphasis of inclusive education must be on inculcating independent living skills, critical thinking, decision making and problem-solving skills, and articulation of their concerns.
- To facilitate the acquisition of integrated knowledge in children the single teacher class system up to Class V should be adopted.
- For effective delivery of education in the inclusive mode, all teacher education (in-service and pre-service) must be restructured.
- Education must aim at developing a system by which abstract concepts are effectively communicated to children with varying learning styles, including those using sign language, Braille, etc.
- To inculcate respect for diversity and the concept of an inclusive society the teacher education programmes and the curriculum framework should incorporate a component of human rights education.
- To nurture all aspects of the personality, viz., cognitive, affective, and connotative—games, dance, drama, music, and art and craft must be given equal importance and value.
- Admission, retention, and full participation of children in all aspects of education, must not be subject to any criteria based on assessment tests and judgment by professionals and experts, including psycho-medical certificates.
- No child with disabilities should be asked to produce certificates either for admission, examination, getting support facilities/ scholarships, etc.
- Reject the policy of failing students *vis-à-vis* enabling each child to overcome perceived difficulties.
- Make sign language the medium of instruction for the hearing impaired and Braille for the visually impaired in view of the diversities.
- Introduce sign language, Braille, and finger Braille as a third language for all children.
- Inculcate among students with SEN, critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving and other coping or life skills in order to promote their self-reliance and independent living capabilities.
- Interpret SEN more broadly and do not restrict its interpretation to the definitions given in the PWD Act.
- Incorporate a component of human rights education in teacher education programmes to inculcate respect for diversity and the concept of an inclusive society.
- Do not subject the admission, retention, getting support facilities, scholarships, and full participation of children in all aspects of education, to any criteria based on assessment tests, judgment by professionals and experts, including psycho-medical certificates.

For years the education system has provided special education and related services to students with SEN and systematically developed a dual service delivery system comprising different settings, different curricula, different services, and different service providers for students with and without SEN. But now in the context of the struggle to affirm and guarantee

the rights of the disabled, the ethics of the dual system are being questioned. The common system, which would bring “all” onto a common platform, is being thought of as a better option.

It is, therefore, important to bring about a number of reforms at various levels in order to develop a “school for all” having an inclusive curriculum. The curriculum needs to be balanced in such a way that it is common for all, and yet takes account of the individual needs of all learners. It is also important to take into consideration pedagogical issues. The curriculum should be accessible to all children and for this specialist support would be required. Care then has to be exercised to ensure that learners with SEN are not segregated from the mainstream by providing this specialist support. How the school organises itself to be an effective school that takes care of the individual needs of all pupils is another issue to be considered. While being flexible in the timetable and delivery of the curriculum, the school should also provide for the resource support needed in the form of special educators, assistive devices, and teaching–learning material. The professional development of teachers and educators is an important issue and must incorporate attitudinal change, and the knowledge and skills necessary to lead to an inclusive society. Finally, no initiative towards inclusive education would be complete without collaborating with parents and without the external support of NGOs and special schools for providing inputs on training, curriculum delivery, assessment, etc.

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