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Changing roles of special schools

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INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses the issues relating to the provisions, practices and curricular concerns for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Though SEN may result from a number of factors, in this paper, however, we are concerned with those arising from physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities.

Trends in provisions in India reflect that the leading policy predisposition before the 1970s has been that of segregation. During the 1880s Christian missionaries started schools for the disabled on grounds of charity. This was followed by the government initiatives to establish separate workshops, model schools, central Braille presses and employment exchanges for the disabled population of the country. However, the changing approaches to disability from the charity model to the human rights model have resulted in diversity of policy and practice. In the 1970s the IEDC scheme was launched by the Union government for providing educational opportunities to learners with SEN in regular schools. Nevertheless, the statistics show that though the integration of learners with SEN gathered some momentum, the coverage under this scheme remained inadequate. There was a clear need for fuller access of children with SEN to all educational opportunities. Dissatisfaction with the slow progress towards integration along with the consideration of the costs involved led to a demand for a radical change. After the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca in 1990s, inclusion became the magic word in the educational field. The *Salamanca Statement* adopted by representatives of 92 Governments and 25 International Organizations has, in fact, set the policy agenda for inclusive education on a global basis. Inclusive education refers to all learners, young people – with or without disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary pre-school provisions, schools and community educational settings with appropriate network of support services.

Role of special schools :

Special schools have been set up in the past and provisions have been made for integrated

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education. In 1947, India had a total of 32 such schools for the blind, 30 for the deaf, and three for the mentally retarded. The number of such schools increased to around 3000 by the year 2000 (NCERT-UNESCO Regional Workshop Report, 2000). Thus, India at present has what Pijl and Meijer (1991) refer to as "two tracks". In other words, it has parallel but separate policies on segregation and integration.

Special schools for children with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and locomotor disabilities are streamlined to follow a curriculum that is almost in line with the general education curriculum. The plus curriculum and the adaptation of instructional methodologies are followed where necessary. Children with mental retardation on the other hand require a specialized curriculum to meet their specific educational needs.

Over time, however, there has been growing awareness that special education in special schools maybe overly restrictive, and instead of working outside the mainstream classrooms, the special schools can work with, and provide support to, regular schools. Early in 1992, the Programme of Action, while promoting integrated education, had also suggested a Pragmatic Placement Principle. It postulated that learners with disabilities who can be educated in general schools should be educated in general schools, and those studying in special schools should be transferred to general schools once they are ready to make the shift (MHRD, Programme of Action, 1992). This was endorsed in 1994 by the Salamanca Statement (statement issued by the World Conference on Special Needs Education) recommendations for an alternative role for special schools. Hence, special schools in their new found identity would become a far more flexible resource, by working in partnership with and creating a response to special needs, not only in the alternative form of provision and intervention, but within the mainstream classroom, curricula, and pedagogies. Special and general education, in other words, are gearing for a significant move to come closer together.

Briefly stated, the education of persons with disabilities in India has been recognized as an integral part of the educational system, hence, the policies and programmes adopted in recent years have been in accordance with this belief.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2000), brought out by the NCERT, recommended inclusive schools for all without specific reference to pupils with SEN as a way of providing quality education to all learners According to NCFSE:

Segregation and isolation is good neither for learners with disabilities nor for general learners without disabilities. Societal requirement is that learners with special needs should be educated along with other learners in inclusive schools, which are cost effective and have sound pedagogical practices (NCERT, 2000)

The NCFSE also recommended definitive action at the level of curriculum makers, teachers, writers of teaching-learning materials, and evaluation experts for the success of this strategy. This precipitated a revision of the IEDC scheme. This revision is in progress and has, to a certain extent, gained ground in the country.

Inclusive preschool :

School A is from Nursery to Class X, with two to three sections per class. It has about 800 students. It employs both English and Hindi as the medium of instruction and has a maximum of 30 students per class.

Table 1 : Enrollment of disabled children in schools under the integrated educational programme (Stage: Primary)

		Type of disability					
Area	Management	Visual impairment	Hearing impairment	Orthopaedic handicaps	Mental retardation	Others	Total
Rural	Govt	1539	1307	15168	1066	2070	21150
	Non-Govt	391	354	2189	188	80	3202
	Total	1930	1661	17357	1254	1250	24352
Urban	Govt.	896	1420	5072	1694	1382	10464
	Non-Govt.	982	1877	3959	800	1538	9156
	Total	1878	3297	9031	2494	2920	19620
Total	Govt.	2435	2727	20240	2760	3452	31614
	Non-Govt	1373	2231	6148	988	1618	12358
	Total	3808	4958	26388	3748	5070	43972

Note: Govt includes the Central Government and the State Governments as also Local Bodies and Non-Govt includes Pvt. Aided and Pvt. Unaided.
Source : NCERT, 1998

Table 2 : Enrollment of disabled children in schools under the integrated educational programme (Stage: Upper Primary)

		Type of disability					
Area	Management	Visual impairment	Hearing impairment	Orthopaedic handicaps	Mental retardation	Others	Total
Rural	Govt	996	533	6734	369	926	9558
	Non-Govt	262	264	1582	67	141	2316
	Total	1258	797	8316	436	1067	11874
Urban	Govt.	604	904	3781	271	251	5811
	Non-Govt.	736	581	2293	572	1467	5649
	Total	1340	1485	6074	843	1718	11460
Total	Govt.	1600	1437	10515	640	1177	15369
	Non-Govt	998	845	3875	639	1608	7965
	Total	2598	2282	14390	1279	2785	23334

Note: Govt includes the Central Government and the State Governments as also Local Bodies and Non-Govt includes Pvt. Aided and Pvt. Unaided.
Source : NCERT, 1998

If you visit the nursery school, you will find children playing, learning, and having fun. You will observe children with SEN in each class. The SEN are because of intellectual, hearing, and vision impairments and neuromuscular and attention deficits disorders. But they are so well integrated in the group that one cannot identify them from the rest. If you talk to the teacher about inclusion of such children in the class, you will hear her say that they are like any other children. How has this happened?

This has happened very naturally. For example, when a teacher spotted a child not singing along with other children, she asked the child to stand next to her and repeat the rhyme along with her, while she prompted him. By a happy coincidence, the student trainees of the Diploma in Early Childhood Education were carrying out teaching practice at that very school. The trainees discussed the strategies that could be adopted for enhancing the

participation of children in learning process, and the teachers realized the relevance of these strategies in the education of children with SEN and incorporated them in their own practice. Thus, they began using three-dimensional teaching–learning materials, masks, and puppets for story telling, using classmates as a peer tutors during rhymes, games, and the like. This new approach proved a rewarding experience and promoted close bonding among the students in each class.

By virtue of this experience, the school has adopted an open policy for admissions to its Nursery class. The teachers have no hesitation in accepting children with SEN, and the peer group readily welcomes them.

Inclusive primary school :

School B, is a neighborhood school, serving children of daily-wage employees residing in the slum areas of a city. The school was established by a well-wisher, who is a teacher living in the same neighborhood. This teacher wanted to achieve the goal of "education for all". She believed that no child should be excluded from school. When challenges were seen in accommodating children with SEN because of large class enrollments and limited resources, she sought support from special education specialists. Technical support was extended for assessment, educational programming, adapting teaching methods, and Teaching–Learning Materials (TLM), for including children appropriately [from Upper Kindergarten (UKG) to Class III]. It was necessary to interact with parents on a weekly basis in the school and ensure support for transferring learning to home conditions. Worksheets, teaching materials, and simplified techniques using practical methods were introduced. After providing constant support for six months through teacher trainees placed in the school, it was rewarding to see parents start to attend meetings regularly and ask for clarifications about helping the child at home and actively supporting the child in completing home tasks. Simultaneously, teachers expressed satisfaction at the children's performance at school and found parents motivated in reporting children's progress at home tasks such as completing homework. This exercise enabled parents and teachers to realize the importance of closer collaboration and its benefits in monitoring the child's performance in academics by using simple teaching materials and practical methods for teaching functional academics in primary classes, thus leading to the inclusion of children with SN. The teachers reported that the literature and manuals developed by experts, such as, the resource book for teachers on educating children with learning problems in primary schools, functional academics for students with mental retardation, the inclusive preschool package, and the school's readiness to accept children with SN, were very useful in gaining the knowledge and skills to teach these children.

The child's education cannot be achieved through only one teacher but must reflect a whole school approach in which all members of the staff are involved in the development of agreed goal-directed, problem-solving strategies. In order for this to work, there needs to be a structuring of this whole environmental system, that is, through the development of the curriculum, its pedagogy, and its, organization. In this way children's special learning needs can in principle be met.

The goals of education are the same for all children provided that these goals are balanced and brought in harmony with the individual needs of each child. Applebee (1998)

stresses the importance of instituting conversational domains in planning curricula. According to him:

In schools these domains have been pre-established and take the form of disciplines such as language, mathematics, social studies, and science. A more appropriate emphasis might be domains that are culturally specific and ambue a natural facilitation for conversation centered around "living traditions". In order to accomplish this end, participation is key and students are actually "doing" science or social studies instead of simply reading or being told about [them].

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