School Readiness: Preparing For the Challenge of Diversity Post Inclusion

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Abstract	Original Research Article

Though the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 mandates free and compulsory education for all children in the age-group 06-14 years the debate over where students with disabilities should receive education continues unabated. There is a school of thought which advocates inclusive education for children with disabilities in mainstream schools and the other argues for special schools where children with special needs (CWSN) learners because "without one-to-one specialized instruction would simply not learn and their futures would be sacrificed" [1]. Now after more than two decades later since the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act, 1995 the recent landmark legislation Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) 2016 calls for greater inclusion of the disabled children in the country in regular mainstream schools. The canvas of inclusion grew larger with 21 disabilities finding a place in the recently enacted legislation of 2016. This calls for a massive change in the structure of education in our country in the elementary education scenario. Moreover, our government efforts under Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyn (RMSA) to make secondary education free for children with special needs renders the "newest challenge is to make inclusive practices available to everybody, everywhere and all the time [1]. This paper highlights the findings of a study of the strategies of inclusion as practiced in government schools of Delhi. The paper also discusses the schools' readiness (Sarva Sikshya Abhiyan SSA's 3 pronged strategy for inclusion) in trying to prepare for the new challenge of inclusion and what systemic school improvement efforts need to be met.

Keywords: Inclusive education, school environment, classroom strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Education for the disabled in India may be traced back to early seventies, when the *Integrated Education for the Disabled (IEDC)* was introduced way back in 1974. But the scenario was one of segregation of such learners as disabled learners were always at the periphery in the absence of any policy for the differently abled. Now after more than two decades later since the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act, 1995 the recent landmark legislation Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) 2016 calls for greater inclusion of the disabled children in the country in regular mainstream schools. The canvas of inclusion grew larger with 21 disabilities finding a place in the recently enacted legislation of 2016. This calls for a massive change in the structure of education in our country in the elementary education scenario. Moreover, our government efforts under Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyn (RMSA) to make secondary education free for children with special needs renders the "newest challenge is to make inclusive practices available to everybody, everywhere and all the time [1].

Though the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 mandates free and compulsory education for all children in the age-group 06 – 14 years the debate over where students with disabilities should receive education continues unabated. There is a school of thought which advocates inclusive education for children with disabilities in mainstream schools and the other argues for special schools where children with special needs (CWSN) learners because "without one-to-one specialized instruction would simply not learn and their futures would be sacrificed" [1].

Eighth All India School Education Survey (8th AISES): Statistics on CWSN

The main findings of the Eight All India School Education Survey (8th AISES) with reference date 30 September, 2009 regarding schooling facilities for children with disabilites are as under: Out of a total

12, 99, 902 schools in the country, only 2, 74,445 (21.11%) schools adhere to inclusive education for disabled children. Out of 2, 74, 445, the proportion of primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary schools adhering to inclusive education are 1, 65, 966 (60.47 %), 77, 757 (28.33%), 18, 084 (6.59 %) and 12, 638 (5.07 %).

- There are 8, 35, 287 differently abled (CWSN) students enrolled at all stages in the country. This comprises of children with different disabilities viz. visual impairment (29.16 %), hearing impairment (14.47 %), orthopedic (locomotor) disability (25.05 %), intellectual impairment (22.35 %), multiple impairment (4.20 %) and others (4.77%).
- Out of the total enrolment of differently abled students, 52.27 %, 28.78 %, 15. 52 % and 3.45 % are enrolled at Primary, Upper Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary stages respectively.
- There are 7,60, 327 students with visual, hearing, orthopedic and intellectual impairment. Out of this the degree of disability is known for 65.93 % students.

Research in India in inclusive practices in school is rudimentary and practice differs from school to school [2]. Research has indicated that a school's leadership enterprise provides the direction to the policies and procedures to be followed and sustained at school. The role of a school head, based at each institutional level, is of a leader and acts as an agent of the state, is to further the cause of the government. The sub-group report for the 12th plan, Elementary Education, Government of India identifies "the key focal areas for inclusive education of CWSN in the 12th plan would be identification of 'hidden CWSN', development of human resource for support services, and infrastructure and material support for inclusive education".

Keeping the above considerations in mind the researcher developed a school readiness information blank (SRIB – CWSN), in an attempt to understand the implementation strategy of the government schools in response to The RTE Act, 2009, calling for an inclusive agenda.

METHODOLOGY
Sample
The study was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis to study the process of implementation of inclusive education in schools of Delhi. 7 schools under the Directorate of Education, Delhi were part of the sample. Purposeful sampling was done to select the schools from a list of schools obtained from the office of the State Project Director, SSA Mission, Delhi. This list was also cross-checked with the list obtained from the Deputy Director Education (DDE) from the two districts – south-east district and central district in which the study was conducted.

The schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria:
- Only government schools under Directorate of Education (DOE) were considered for the study
- A sizable presence of CWSN (5-6) learners enrolled in the school.

Tool used
The school Readiness Information Blank (SRIB- CWSN) blank developed by the researcher focuses on 3 key areas of:
- Physical access
- Social Access
- Leadership enterprise (The present article is based on this theme)

Out of the many tools used in the study this paper presents the findings related to the self-developed School Readiness Information Blank (SRIB- CWSN) by the researcher. The tool has 3 themes with number of sub-themes. Out of the three themes framed in the tool discussion of the present paper is limited to the single theme of:
- Schools's leadership enterprise 7 government school principals under DOE schools formed part of the sample.

Some of the findings under the sub-themes are presented as follows:
- Principals views regarding inclusive education and the inclusion experience:
- Schools efforts to address the continuum of services required for CWSN learners

Principals views regarding inclusive education and the inclusion experience:
A principal of a school in Delhi has rightly put it,
> *"Inclusive education is still in its initial stages, we are still figuring it out as how best to address the needs of CWSN learners amidst regular students. Adapting our school environments to student diversity is an ongoing challenge in the face of constraints of resources".*

Another Principal of a school where a special education teacher (SET) has been in service since more than 3 years mentioned,
> *" at the school and teacher level how can just one SET handle the pressure of CWSN learners, given a situation where CWSN enrolments are on the upswing".*

Yet another Head of school commented,

"SSA has more than one million school having all disability classrooms. With the recent legislation of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD), how does a single disability teacher handle such varied disability cases".

Another interesting observation was put forth by a school principal was,

"Inequity exists in our educational system with regard to the general students among the urban and rural schools. Inclusion without the right resources will derail the government's inclusive agenda".

A comment by another head of a school as,

"For effective implementation of inclusive education, the whole school reform approach needs to be established –from top down to bottom up for scaling up inclusion".

In yet another school, comment of a school principal,

" Inclusive education is definitely a social good of the government but should only be limited to orthopedically handicapped (OH) cases or low vision (LV) cases, or of similar nature. Inclusive education is certainly not suitable for MR children. In fact placing them in mainstream set-up is equivalent to making baarbaad (wasted) of the whole process of education. It is barbaadi (wasteful exercise) for them also and for the regular students due to a lot of chaos associated with inclusion".

From an analysis of the above perceptions of the heads of schools / principals towards inclusive education and the experience of inclusion, the following are reflected.

Training, professional autonomy and teacher collaboration

Many teachers are unaware of the aids and devices that can be used for special needs children. The teacher training programs need to upgrade and provide necessary training accordingly. If teachers have appropriate orientation and are provided training, time-to-time up gradation of skills for handling CWSN in inclusive classrooms, it may result in professional autonomy and speedy decision-making. General classroom teachers have to depend a lot on special education teachers for the education needs of CWSN learners. This will effect in the preparation and development of lesson plans. It will also empower teachers with knowledge about adapted curriculum and technical know-how.

CWSN Rights and peer social acceptance

While analyzing the statements in the context of access to students with disabilities, there is an underlying sense of assumption that emerges is that even though education for all children (06 -14 years) is 'rights based' but welcoming and accepting CWSN in mainstream schools, holistically, would depend to a large extent on the physical and social acceptance of CWSN by the mainstream segment. This is also corroborated by [3-5], 'empowerment is not so much a matter of individual rights as much as a matter of individual access, both physical, in terms of a barrier-free environment, and technological, in terms of appropriate assistive devices'. In classrooms teachers attention and peer acceptance are twin boosters to inclusion as revealed by the consensual experiences of the heads of schools / principals.

Clearly, individual teachers and principals have a major role to play [6]. But among the lessons learned over the years is that inclusion is a multifaceted endeavour that requires collaboration among a variety of stakeholders, grounded in a holistic approach, backed up by a robust policy and systems architecture. Accordingly, it is not enough to look mainly to individual teachers or principals to take the risks and make the sacrifices needed to move inclusion forward [7].

The Continuum of services required for CWSN learners
Strategies used by schools for inclusion were analyzed under the continuum of services for CWSN learners
School level

It is significant to note that strategies for inclusion of CWSN learners are limited to the following:

Screening Procedures
Screening

Schools do not have an institutional - based screening framework in place to identify at risk learners

The CWSN learners are screened on the basis of the following:

- Parents inform the schools during admission of CWSN learners at the school
- Physical appearance of the CWSN learner. Instances of low vision, orthopedically handicapped (OH), Hearing impaired (HI) are easily visible. Problems arise as Learning disabled are difficult to diagnose and identify.
- The behavioural characteristics of learners such as with intellectual impairments as mental retardation (MR) and multiple disabilities (MD)
- Referrals of learners by general classroom teachers to special education teachers on the basis of class work , or work samples

Assessment camps

The CWSN learners are taken to the assessment camps as and when camps are held. It is a

policy of some schools either the special education teachers take them or parents are informed in advance and they arrange for the visit to the assessment camps.

School engagement with parents of CWSN learners
The school informs the parents of CWSN learners regarding the orientation camps held for parents at the district level. Information to such events are provided well in advance to enable them to visit such camps organized at district level. The schools' leadership at 2 schools also tries to keep abreast with the development in inclusive education and disability issues with community linkages with resource experts by way of discussion and deliberations.

On a positive note, the schools have an inclusive vision and the schools' leadership hinted that they are guided by the vision, and not by the doubts that inclusion may detract.

Classroom level
Within the SSA Framework the focus on inclusion is on teacher training and designing of individualized education plans (IEP's) with the assistance of special education teachers of each school. SSA overlooks the CWSN learners requirements from classes I to class VIII.
- Remedial teaching as well as teaching in resource rooms are practiced to facilitate CWSN inclusion.
- The entitlements and support services provided to CWSN learners in inclusive schools are as given under SSA grants
- Inclusion strategies by having provisions in place like special education teacher, individualized education programs, extra time during exams, writers, orientation camp visits, exposure visits, games and sports, capacity building, community linkages etc.

Systemic school improvement efforts
The systemic school improvement efforts needed to scale up inclusion were analyzed in terms of facilitators and barriers to inclusion. The responses of the 7 participants have been clubbed together which are as follows:

An anecdote may be shared:

Vinod, a CWSN learner, studying at class VII in a government boys school suffers from low vision. For the school outing - picnic his parents had given him money to buy chips and biscuits. Vinod wanted to share the chips and biscuits with his friends, regular students of his class. But his dream was cut short with the theft at school. When the researcher probed him, *"aap ne kisi ko baataya ya nahin (Did you inform anybody?)"*, prompt came a reply that *"Teacher ko bataya tha (Informed the teacher)"*.

In yet another anecdote when the CWSN learners were asked by the researcher,
" School mein jab problem hoti hai toh kiske paas jaate ho (Who do you go to in case of any problems?)". Majority of the learners chorused *"teachers"* and *"friends"* followed a close second.

Facilitators to inclusion
- Availability of minimum provisions for successful implementation of inclusive education.

The clubbing of responses of the 7 heads of schools/ principals indicate that this can be the best possible support towards inclusion. These include:
- Capacity building: general classroom teachers trained in cross disability approach and technical know-how of the assistive devices used by CWSN learners like Braille books, Hearing aids, Taylor frames, Stylus etc.

- Resources: resources in terms of teaching-learning materials, and assistive technology for classroom support in teaching a diverse category of learners
- School stakeholder attitude- especially the attitude of general classroom teachers and peer group.
- Sharing success stories will allow revisiting and reviewing strategies by teachers, professionals in the field. Professionals will be enriched by the initiatives and experiences of the success stories. This will serve not only as occasions of stock-taking of the nuances of implementation but also for sharing of the good practices and educational initiatives undertaken.

Triangulation
Being a qualitative study, triangulation was used to generate greater confidence in the findings and provide an accuracy to the research report. The focus group discussion with CWSN learners was used to supplement the findings of the leadership enterprise of the schools.

Along with the views of Principals the facilitating factors of inclusion was found out as a result of focus group inquiry on a sample of CWSN learners conducted by the researcher at a later time, reflects that teachers are the anchors in a CWSN's life. They go to their "Sir's or Maam's" in schools during their troubled times and also at regular times.

The above finding reflects the significance teachers and peer group play in the social life of CWSN learners. Schools for effective inclusion must find ways and means to tap into these resources for creating enabling environments for CWSN learners to participate fully.

The above is also indicative that inclusive education is in stages of development and teething problems are expected. But till the attitude of the school stakeholders are changed accommodation measures for CWSN inclusion will be a barrier.

Barriers to inclusion
Lack of resources in school
With the exception of a resource room and few sessions with the special education teachers (SET's) all the respondents opined that the schools are apparently not in a handsome position to accommodate the school environment meaningfully to cater to CWSN learners.

The reasons cited are, *"large class size, single special education teacher cannot handle varied special needs, teaching-learning materials, etc."*

Lack of school – parental involvement
The *"how to"* of engaging family members as active partners in order to sustain inclusion meaningfully. Family members, especially parents, siblings can offer a lot of assistance in the way a child with disabilities functions.

This finding was a result of the conflict management school heads had to perform as a part of their routine school tasks. This was best reflected as a verbatim response of a principal of a school, "some parents do complain that teachers are not helpful towards their children with special needs". This was also clarified by the principal that on seeking clarification from the concerned teachers, teachers responded by saying that parents do not come to school when informed by teachers to visit such on a scheduled day. Rather they come when its convenient to them. In such situations teachers are engaged with other school tasks. Taking out time for parents to accommodate them out –of-hand, when they come on a "flying visit" disturbs the general teaching-learning process.

The above is also a reflection of the 6 respondents who maintain that "parents usually do not come to schools when they are informed to visit schools by teachers".

CONCLUSION
Keeping the twin backdrops of RTE Act, 2009 and the landmark legislation of RPWD, 2016 school

A case in point as reflected by the following anecdote:

inclusive policies, practices and culture need to be planned in consonance with strategies for inclusion in Indian schools as per the resources , both existing and planned.

What emerges from the findings is that inclusion is a mixed bag- one that is fraught with challenges but also keeping with the spirit of the philosophy behind inclusion, schools will have to make efforts towards meaningful inclusion. As inclusive education is an inevitability (Executive Summary, UNESCO) considering the global changes and sustainability program of 2030 [8].

From the findings it is evident that implementing inclusive education is a challenge. Studies of [9] corroborate this finding that the current challenge is to reinvent schools with new assumptions and more effective practices rather than simply making additions or corrections to existing practice. The study of [10, 11] also indicate real, fundamental change in social institutions (and inclusive education in inclusive systems *is* fundamental change) is complex, difficult work that requires significant time to accomplish and endure [1].

While access and presence in "mainstream" classrooms is a necessary step toward inclusive education for students with disabilities, it is clearly not enough. What happens in those classrooms is equally critical to achieving genuine inclusive education [1].

The above indicate that schools are at initial stages of catering to CWSN learners and a mammoth task remains as how to scale up effective inclusion, especially with the RPWD bringing 21 different disabilities into the fore. Another reason which is troublesome is the ability of mainstream school to provide quality inclusion to the rising curve of CWSN enrolment.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Schools can link with community to arrange for early identification to enable early intervention.
A principal of a school recommended the Delhi government's Bhagidari system may be used to facilitate establishing links with the community for creating awareness about disabilities and for identification and interventions.

Schools to generate awareness among parents of CWSN regarding causes and myths associated with disabilities.
Parents are primary care-givers as research has indicated. However in the Indian context parents lack technical knowledge regarding disability and its causes.

Sameer's is a child with mental retardation. His classroom teacher tries to engage him in regular classroom activities through group work. But Sameer is behaviourally aggressive and fights with his peers. Most of his peers accept him just the way he is. However less than 2 per cent students of his class in a class size of about 50 students engage in verbal duels with him teachers when his teacher is attending to other tasks or during return to home. Sameer's mother blames the class teacher for not taking care of Sameer. The class teacher tries to explain Sameer's position and behaviour with the peers but his mother refuses to accept. She says Sameer's behaviour is stable at home.

At best, they are familiar with the lay conditions and un researched realities associated with disabilities. This is a reflection that parents of CWSN view disability from the narrow, out-dated medical condition focusing on the impairment/s located within the child. Parents need to be apprised of the social model used in education where the limitations are inherent in the barriers of the society in failing to create conducive conditions for CWSN inclusion and not within the child. Such a measure may clear cobwebs in the minds of the primary care givers and may allow a parents of CWSN learners to view disability with a fresh perspective.

Schools to educate parents about the disability legislations with a view to empower parents of CWSN learners

Parental empowerment regarding disability legislations will enable them to reflect on the societal obligations of school stakeholders, especially to provide education of their child with disability in mainstream schools as a matter of rights and not charity.

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