

Differently Challenged Children and Education for All

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Abstract

In India, we have many policies and programmes which aim at education for all particularly students with disabilities taken by government and non government organizations. The paper provides an in-depth and critical examination of efforts being undertaken under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) towards the education of children with disabilities. This focus on SSA is essential as it is currently heralded as the biggest educational movement in the country and hence examining its approach towards the education of children with disabilities brings forth important issues. The focus of this paper is to examine the contribution of Education for All with special reference to children with special educational needs. In the beginning, the paper has focused on the conceptual framework of Education for All, its objective and its important components. A brief review of literature has been also included which exclusively talks about the negative and positive aspects of Education for All in order to highlight the journey of Education for All (SSA).

Keywords: Education for All, Children with Special Educational Needs

Introduction

Many disabled children and young people around the world are denied sustained access to basic education. Some of these disabled children never enter school, others start but make poor progress eventually ‘dropping out’, and it appears that a relatively small proportion are educated in a parallel system of special schools, running alongside mainstream schools. The drive to

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achieve Education for All (EFA) by 2015 has led to a focus on the barriers to participation in basic education for marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2010).

Under India's federal constitution, education is a concern of both the central and state governments. Since independence, state governments have been the major providers of elementary education in India. However the wide differences between states in the emphasis they placed on education and in their capacity to invest in it, accentuated the disparities in the educational attainments of their people.

A recent study by the World Bank (2007), for example, noted that children with disability are five times more likely to be out of school than children belonging to scheduled castes or scheduled tribes (SC or ST). Moreover, when children with disability do attend school they rarely progress beyond the primary level, leading ultimately to lower employment chances and long-term income poverty.

Historical Development towards “Education for All”

Majumdar (2001: 123), analyzing educational provisions for various disadvantaged groups across different states, sums up the scenario for children with disabilities as:

Apparently, nothing is available other than a few government scholarships, facilities in the form of a couple of institutions for boys and girls and institutes for training teachers for the disabled...for the intellectual disability, no conscious developmental scheme is focused on by any of the states.

Even though various efforts have been made in the recent past, both the rates of educational participation and outcomes of education, remain very poor for children and young adults with disabilities. Illiteracy rates for this group remain much higher than the general population and school attendance continues to lag behind that of non-disabled peers.

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Analysis of various government reports and policy documents clearly suggests that various policy frameworks have provided a significant impetus to efforts undertaken at the national level. The following four legislations have had a significant impact on the government and the NGO sector, of these the first three are specific to people with disabilities:

- Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992): states that Children with Special Needs will be taught by a trained teacher.
- Persons with Disabilities Act (1995): educational entitlement for all Children with Special Needs up to 18 years in an appropriate environment.
- National Trust Act (1999): provide services and support to severely disabled children.
- The 86th Constitutional Amendment (2007): free and compulsory education to children, up to 14 years.

These legal mandates have also helped shape the comprehensive National Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of the Children and Persons with Disabilities (MHRD, 2005), and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (an MSJE initiative).

With India becoming signatory to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the 1990s saw the rapid incorporation of the term ‘inclusive education’ in various official documents, reports published by institutions such as the NCERT and media. The background paper of a workshop organized by the RCI stated:

“While special education began in India with the establishment of special schools, it was in 1960s–1970s that integrated education began to be advocated; however, after 1994, inclusive education is strongly recommended (RCI, 2001: 2).”

This focus on inclusive education is evident in the approach adopted by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). At a national workshop organized to discuss the role of inclusive education, the Director of Elementary Education and Literacy argued:

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Zero rejection policy had to be adopted as every disabled child had to be educated. But multiple options could be used ... [these] include inclusive 10 education, distance education, home-based education, itinerant model and even alternative schooling. (DPEP, 2001: 3)

The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, SSA (into which DPEP was incorporated) thus extends the dual approach historically adopted towards the education of children with disabilities, by propagating a “multi-optional delivery system”. It categorically brings the concerns of children with disabilities, or those it terms as “children with special needs (CWSN)” under the framework of “inclusive education” (IE):

SSA will ensure that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided education in an appropriate environment. SSA will adopt ‘zero rejection’ policy so that no child is left out of the education system. (SSA, 2007:1)

SSA further extends the range of options from special and mainstream/ ‘regular’ schools to Education Guarantee Scheme/Alternative and Innovative Education (EGS/AIE) and Home Based Education (HBE). Therefore the implicit assumption that inclusion should strengthen or enable mainstream educational participation of children with disabilities does not necessarily hold true in the model proposed by SSA. Rather it seems to advocate a stance that education should be imparted in an environment that is most suited to the child’s needs and there should be flexibility in planning. While the SSA objectives are expressed nationally, it is expected that various states and districts will endeavour to achieve universalisation in their own respective contexts and by 2010.

It therefore offers each district flexibility to plan for activities aimed at educating CWSN, depending on the number of children identified and the resources available to effectively implement the IE programme. While such flexibility might be regarded as a positive step, it is not surprising that this has resulted in many different models of inclusive education operative across the country- raising concerns about the quality and effectiveness of provision.

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The Origin of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a central Government project is a historic stride towards achieving the long cherished goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) through a time bound integrated approach, in partnership with State. The Education for All (SSA) is started in the year 2002 in 248 districts of 18 states in India. Programmes of Education for All (SSA) are implemented through concerned state government. In the beginning it was run by DPEP. Later, it was named as SSA.

A recent initiative of the Government of India to Universalize Elementary Education is Education for All (SSA). The programme aims at providing useful and relevant elementary education in the age group of 6-14 years by 2010 including children with disabilities. The 86th Constitutional Amendment, which has made free and compulsory education a right of all children from 6-14 years of age, has given further thrust to the goal of UEE. The objective of UEE cannot be achieved without including children with special needs under the ambit of elementary education.

Education for All is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country. However, UEE cannot be achieved unless children with special needs (CWSN) are also provided access to education. Hence, education of CWSN is an essential part of the SSA framework.

The project facilitates school building constructing facilities, developing educational resources, recruitment of normal school teachers and conducting teachers training programmes to them. As a part of project special educational teachers are appointed at the block level to meet and fulfill the special needs of children with disabilities. In addition orientation programmes for regular teachers are conducted on management of children with special needs in their class rooms. Because of these there may be changes in the perception of regular teachers and the parents of children with mental retardation with regard to the training and learning disabilities of children with mental retardation.

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Experiences of programmes like DPEP and various research findings have shown that the number of children with special needs in every district is by no means small. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, which is a nodal Ministry for disability issues estimates the number of children having special needs as 5%. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights & Full Participation) Act, 1995 provides that every child with a disability shall have access to free education up to 18 years of age. This is a statutory responsibility cast on all appropriate governments.

One of the focus areas of Education for All (SSA) is to increase access, enrolment, retention of all children and to reduce school drop outs. The emphasis of Education for All (SSA) is also on providing quality education to all children. Rarely has it been considered that the special educational needs of these children could be met by providing adequate resource support to them in regular schools and giving them an opportunity to receive education in the most appropriate environment. Hence, education of children with special needs is considered an important area in Education for All (SSA).

Objectives of Education for All (SSA)

The objectives of SSA mainly focus on increasing access, enrolment and retention of all children as well as improving the quality of education. The objectives of SSA can only be realized, if CWSN are also included under the ambit of elementary education. Realizing the importance of integrating special children in regular schools, SSA framework has made adequate provisions for educating CWSN.

- All children in school, Education Guarantee Centre, Alternate School, 'Back-to-School' camp by 2003
- All children complete five years of primary schooling by 2007
- All children complete eight years of elementary schooling by 2010

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- Focus on elementary education of satisfactory quality with emphasis on education for life
- Bridge all gender and social category gaps at primary stage by 2007 and at elementary education level by 2010
- Universal retention by 2010.

Provisions for CWSN under Education for All (SSA)

SSA offers the following provisions to CWSN:

- Up to Rs.1200/- per child for integration of disabled children, as per specific proposal, per year
- District plan for children with special needs will be formulated within the Rs.1200 per child norm
- Involvement of resource institutions to be encouraged.

Approach and Options for CWSN in Education for All (SSA)

SSA ensures that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. Hence, SSA has adopted a zero rejection policy. This means that no child having special needs should be deprived of the right to education. This has also been strengthened by the 86th Amendment to the Constitution, which makes Elementary Education a fundamental right of every child. The SSA framework, in line with the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights & Full Participation) Act, 1995 mentions that a child with special needs should be taught in an environment, which is best, suited to his/her, learning needs. These might include special schools, EGS&AIE or even home-based education. SSA also offers each district, flexibility to plan for Inclusive Education (IE) activities, depending on the number of children identified and the resources available to effectively implement the IE programme.

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Components of Education of CWSN under Education for All (SSA):

The interventions suggested under SSA for inclusive education of disabled children are as follows:

- Awareness
- Necessary infrastructure for planning and management
- Early detection and identification
- Functional and formal assessment
- Educational placement
- Preparation of Individualized Educational Plan
- Aids and appliances
- Teacher training
- Resource support
- Strengthening of special schools
- Removal of architectural barriers
- Monitoring and evaluation

The state implementation societies (SIS) will also undertake periodic monitoring, representatives of the national mission for UEE and national level institutions like NCTE, NIEPA, and NCERT will also undertake periodic monitoring provide resource support to the SIS to strengthen appraisal and monitoring systems. Efforts to associated autonomous institution willing to take up state specific responsibilities for research and evaluation will also be associated in developing effective tools for conducting achievement test, monitoring quality aspects of programme implementation, evaluation and research studies.

Need to Move Beyond Redistribution to Reorganization

Efforts aimed at the education of children with disabilities in India have been largely framed by the distributive paradigm of social justice, where the focus has been on equality in terms of

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access and provision of resources (as evident from the overwhelming focus on aids, appliances and assistive devices). However working with such a conception of justice is rather limiting and has two basic flaws. Firstly, it is too individualistic in its perspective and locates the problem ‘within’ the child, and secondly it takes attention away from questioning how social structures and institutions uphold patterns of injustice.

On one hand, it can be argued that this focus on redistribution of resources and access is desirable and important, as children with disabilities tend to belong to the lower economic strata, and without these special schemes are likely to remain deprived of basic essentials. However, such a narrow focus on structural issues is wholly inadequate and does not deliver the whole of justice. Here the tendency is to ‘fix’ first level concerns, wherein access does not automatically deliver equality.

Evidence from Singal (2006) and Jha (2002) suggests that awareness of a concept, such as ‘inclusive education’ is no guarantee for ensuring that the desired teaching-learning practices are in place. Changes in the classroom require simultaneous development of reforms in professional development, curriculum, alongside a change in attitudes and beliefs as reflected in the culture of the school. While it is essential that teachers are made aware of and assisted in developing innovative teaching strategies, such a skewed focus on knowledge underplays the need for focusing upon and changing values, beliefs and attitudes. There is a need for re-examining perceptions around the values and purposes of education for children with disabilities. The ongoing debates around ‘inclusion’ in India might provide the impetus for a critical reflection on the current teaching practices and educational policies. Inclusion needs a different school culture, and this might be an opportunity for the Indian education system to 36 critically re-examine its many failings to enable the purposeful participation of the nation’s children.

“It should, and will be our objective to make mainstream education not just available but accessible, affordable and appropriate for students with disabilities. I also believe that if we make our schools accessible to children with disabilities, we will also be improving the quality of education for all children.”

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Statement made in the Rajya Sabha on 21.3.2005 by the Minister for Human Resource Development on the subject of the Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities shift this to a more appropriate place

Conclusion

Education of children with special needs is a relatively new concept and requires a great deal of technical expertise to deal with the needs of children having different kinds of impairments. The programme of Education for All especially for children with special needs could be developed by each state and district. In view of the zero rejection policy adopted by Education for All (SSA) for children with special needs and in view of the fact that some children with severely disabled may require specialized services, a variety of options that could be offered to those children who cannot benefit fully by going to regular schools. Hence there is a dire need to sensitize, educate and train the regular teachers in order to equip them for effective educational management of children with special educational needs.

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