

# Education of Children with Disabilities

## Right to Inclusion with Appropriate Support

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### Introduction

Accountability is the buzzword of today and is used both ways: upwards and downwards. More than ever, each of us, irrespective of the position or role that we acquire in this continuum, needs to reflect and respond. Do we really mean and act upon what we are saying or committing? Do I have a reason to take this position? The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), the most powerful body of the Indian education system, met on September 21, 2019 and the following statement was made in the inaugural address by the Honourable HRD Minister: “The Draft National Education Policy 2019 (Draft NEP 2019) is built on the foundational pillars of Access, Equity, Quality, Accountability & Affordability. It aims towards an education system built on the premises of quality and equity inter alia for building an equitable, just and human society. Several reforms measures have been proposed in the Draft NEP 2019 so that all students have equitable access to quality education across the country.<sup>1</sup>”

We will know what the Draft National Education Policy, 2019 implies for the current and coming generation of millions of children of this country including children with disabilities (CwDs). *Under-Represented Groups* (URGs) is a term that this policy uses for disadvantaged groups such as SCs, STs, OBCs, Minorities and so on. The noteworthy point is that *Gender* has been recognised as a phenomenon cutting across all people and my only concern is, then why not also disability, as it is a disadvantage across all social, economic, geographical and other such man-made parameters that define under-representation/disadvantage? The final and more comprehensive National Policy on Education is now available as promised by the government. It still needs to be approved by the Parliament. The Section 6 has still not mentioned ‘disability’ as a cross-cutting challenge.

Are we ready to meet the challenges and opportunities that are at hand to really accountable to the coming generations? A 16-year old student, Greta Thunberg from Sweden, has recently started

a movement on Climate Change, challenging each of us with the question – Are we doing enough? She has been able to reach many students and citizens across the globe. Interestingly, as per media reports<sup>2</sup>, she also happens to be in the autism spectrum.

### Being different can be a gift

Thunberg’s parents say their daughter, once painfully introverted, was always a bit different from other children. Four years ago, she was diagnosed with Asperger’s on the autism spectrum which helps explain her remorseless focus on the core issue of climate change after overcoming depression. In the “Being Different Is A Gift” she told Nick Robinson when interviewed on Radio 4’s Today programme, ‘It makes me see things from outside the box. I don’t easily fall for lies I can see through things. If I would’ve been like everyone else, I wouldn’t have started this school strike for instance.’

*Source: (Extract from Birrell, Ian, April 23, 2019).*

Hence, there is a need to move beyond advocating the need to *include* persons with disabilities (PwDs) and become accountable and proactive in ensuring that we have created empowering environments in our education system and, at a micro-level, in our institutions of education from early childhood to adulthood. If we follow the experiences of many children and young PwDs within our communities and across the world, the message is loud and clear – inclusion is empowering, but not for *them* but for each one of *us*. We need to discover and build upon the strengths and not get entangled with perceptions that may not be sound enough to take the path of inclusion. Let us understand the concept of education against this backdrop and discover together the road to empowerment.

### Education

Education is defined as per the Greek notion of *educare*, to bring out or develop potential. Such

education is:

- *Deliberate and hopeful*  
It is learning we set out to make happen in the belief that people can be more.
- *Informed, respectful and wise*  
A process of inviting truth and possibility.
- *Grounded in a desire that at all may flourish and share in life*  
A cooperative and inclusive activity that looks to help people to live their lives as well as they can (Smith, 2015).<sup>ii</sup>

The education of CwDs is being addressed through different modalities though the preferred provisions vary with the developments in the history of education in general, and of CwDs, in particular. The state of the economy and the value system also affect the modality mix. There are countries where inclusive education is the dominant mode and others where special schooling continues to be the preferred mode. In many countries, mixed modalities are valued, including home-based services for children with severe and multiple disabilities and non-institutionalisation.

Today, inclusive education is based on the premise that all children can learn in a regular school in the

neighbourhood. That the system should change for the diversity of learners and not the learner changing for the system has been highlighted in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). The assessment that the quality of education, in inclusive as well as in the special education setting, remains wanting, is based on conjecture and not on rigorous research, which has not yet focused on the effectiveness of alternative modalities.

The CBSE has already started talking about ‘life skills’ and the latest version of the NEP (2019) also refers to it. It is to be noted that the ‘Plus/Enrichment Curriculum’ for children with disabilities in special schools is also about life skills. The Skills Council also has it on its agenda. NCERT needs to address this while designing the National Curriculum Framework 2020.

### Learning from legal provisions

The education of CwDs is one of the major responsibilities of the government today. In India, we have been working towards this approach since 1974 through the Ministry of Social welfare (now known as, the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment). An analysis of Commissions, Five Year Plans and subsequent Acts passed by the

Inclusive Education provisions under Five Year Plans	
Five Year Plans	Major Developments
First Plan 1951-56	Under Social Welfare
Second Plan 1956-61: Third Plan 1961-66	Increased Facilities, MOE: National Advisory Group, Surveys NGOs’ involvement
Rest Period	Education Commission, National Policy—IED
Fourth and Fifth Plan 1968-74, 1974-79	IED Scheme in MSW, Selective coverage
Sixth Plan 1980-85	IEDC Scheme in M/HRD, Prevention, Integration, Sample Surveys
Seventh plan 1985-90	NGOs, women and the disabled at par
National Policy 1986, POA	Chapter on Education of Handicapped
Eighth Plan 1992-97	PWD Act, RCI, DPEP, Sample Survey
Ninth Plan 1997-2002	SSA, National Trust, Census Survey, 86th Amendment, NSSO 2002
Tenth Plan 2002-2007	Monitoring, Expansion, Legal Framework, Reservation, Minister’s statement, National Action Plans, Comprehensive Plan on Disability in making (IECYD)

Eleventh Plan 2008- 2012	IEDSS, RMSA, RTE, Revising PWD ACT, Revised SSA Framework, NCPCR, EOs in Institutions of Higher Learning, Disability Studies
Twelfth Plan 2012-17	Amendment, 2012 to RTE 2009, RPWD Act, 2016 and follow up Notifications
Post 2017	NITI Ayog: The Three-Year Action Agenda (2017-18 to 2019-20) Samagra Shiksha imbibing SSA & RMSA RTE and Choice of special schools (RPWD, 2018)
Draft National Education Policy, 2019	Presented in CABE, 20 September 2019; focus on 5+3+3+4 (in place of 12 years of school education and includes pre-primary and grades 1&2 as Foundational Learning of 5 Years) and Disability as part of URG; inclusion across the board; changing character of all regulatory bodies such as MCI, AICTE, NCTE, RCI and others.

Source: Developed by Sudesh Mukhopadhyay, 2018 based on her Chapters.

Note: Some landmarks have been mentioned for Inclusive Education; there could be some omissions as many other Acts also address Disabilities though do not mention explicitly in the titles of programmes and schemes.

Parliament gives an idea of the developments. One can summarise these developments as under:

This table captures the efforts towards Inclusive Education since Independence. Inclusion is now a well-known term even though still an evolving process for all countries, including India.

As a result of enabling policies and legislations, all states are witnessing more and more court cases, taken right up to the Supreme Court, indicating the gaps and challenges from policy to implementation in actualising the spirit with the action.<sup>iii</sup> Clause 16 of the RTE Act (2009), relating to non-detention has been amended in 2017. Its removal can have serious implications for all vulnerable children, as the system is not self-monitoring nor are schools accountable for the support that was envisaged under this Act of 2009 that now also covers CwDs.

In the light of provisions and now the intent reflected by the Draft NEP, 2019 (DNEP 2019), it is important for all policy-makers, planners, implementers and stakeholders to expand the vision of inclusion to include equality of opportunity, as well as economic and social mobility, for all sections of society including PwDs. While schooling till the senior secondary level is important and recommended, the significance of the initial years of schooling till 14 years of age cannot be undermined or over-emphasised. Since education is on the Concurrent List and disability, as such, is a State subject, we all need to understand the implications of translating

the National Policy into actionable implementation provisions. Related orders and administrative actions are always with the States. CSR and public-private partnerships need to be understood with care and caution as the market economy also has impacted the flow of funds from international agencies, such as UNESCO and UNICEF.

### The challenge of human resources

Ever since the inception of special and inclusive education, the availability and continuous capacity-building of the human resources for empowering CwDs has been a critical issue. The quality of education can be facilitated only with adequate and planned, professionally competent human resources. Staffing in schools needs to be determined on the basis of real, not minimum, requirements. The RTE Act must recognise this reality and not relegate the recruitment of teachers, special teachers and other professionals to chance and ad-hoc decision making. The challenge is:

- Do we have enough service providers?
- Should we also look at the nomenclature that we use? For example, if we look at special schools as schools with special services then these will be a type of school established for a special purpose, such as the Navodaya Vidyalayas, Kendriya Vidyalayas and Sainik schools.
- Also, how do we plan to provide the special support that some children may need? We

need to study, analyse, research and document circumstances that are created by location, social environment, health, disabling conditions since birth, due to accidents and many other such developments in the life of an individual.<sup>iv</sup>

Disability-wise data released by reporting agencies bring up questions for planning services and resources. Children with neurological and sensory disabilities have significant issues of proper diagnosis for placements in schooling facilities and services and enabling interventions for learning. No information is available for learning outcomes as of now. There is diversity in the needs of children with, for example, orthopaedic, CP and multiple disabilities, with each child having a different learning profile. While it is important to strive for the same outcomes, it must be remembered that pace, pedagogy, support, non-remedial enrichment interventions differ. These will have implications for learning outcomes and, flowing from that, impact assessment procedures and curriculum design.

### **Special education schools - a continuum of inclusion**

Inclusive education differs from previously-held notions of *integration* and *mainstreaming*, which tended to be concerned primarily with disability and special educational needs and implied learners changing or becoming ready for (or deserving of) accommodation by the mainstream. By contrast, inclusion is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child and respond.

Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities from students without disabilities. A rights-based approach places emphasis on full participation by students with disabilities and respect for their social, civil and educational rights. Going by both, the spirit and the provisions in the RPWD Act 2016, schools are not to distinguish between accepted terms such as 'general education and special education' programmes. Instead, school processes are to be so structured that all students learn together, with space for choosing to be special schools.<sup>v</sup>

We are the facilitators of, not barriers to rights! Do we, as national and state governments, respect the right to exercise choices? Can we say with confidence that all schools are inclusive, and all special schools fulfil the criteria of the RTE Act? This is an important question that the system must consider, as the RPWD confers the right not only for schooling but the right to choose special schools, if need be. NITI Aayog expects MHRD to deal with the

education of CwDs, as well. Hence, the response of the Central and State Governments will decide how we move further on our journey for inclusion and towards schooling for all rather than using labels, like inclusive schools, special schools, schools with special services. The outcomes of CABE, Sept 2019 and the NEP 2019 are going to impact all these concerns.

### **Teacher preparation and management**

Pre-service teacher preparation is crucial. While the NCTE is the regulating body for all teachers, the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), established as an Act of Parliament prior to NCTE, regulates the training of special teachers. In 2015, the RCI updated its curriculum for a two-year course and is geared to prepare teachers for general and special schools to serve CwDs following the NCTE notification of 2014 for two-year B Ed and M Ed courses that are cross-disability oriented with specialisation in two disabilities while ensuring pedagogy for school subjects. However, NCTE accepts the RCI qualifications of both the diploma and degree in Special Education only up to the primary level. The result has been a setback to appropriate and adequate number of professionals to serve CwDs in schools as they are underpaid contract teachers without opportunities for career progression.

### **Vision and challenges for teacher education (DNEP 2019)**

The National Policy on Children (2013) gives details of the expected role of service providers, including those for education. There is a need to look at manpower requirements from 3-18 years of age groups and the related role of the statutory bodies.

Ad-hoc, stand-alone notifications by the respective ministries will lead to chaos and poor implementation of the policy. Pre-service, in-service and continuous professional growth needs to be seen as an ongoing process, serviced by universities and other higher education institutes (HEIs) as stipulated in the section on higher education using Face to Face and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) modes. Certifications, credits transfer, subject options, manpower, recruitment and service conditions, including career paths, all need to be addressed simultaneously. Many of these aspects are crucial for successful implementation in the larger interest of children in general, and, PwDs in particular, a neglected area so far. Under the new guidelines set down by the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST), teachers will be prepared for different tracks in the B Ed programme, of which Special Education teaching will be one.

## Specialist teachers

There is an urgent need for more special educators in certain areas of school education. Some examples of such specialist requirements include subject teaching for CwDs at the middle and secondary school levels, education of children with singular interests and talents and teaching for specific learning disabilities. Such teachers would require not only subject-teaching knowledge and understanding of subject-related aims of education but would also need to possess the relevant skills for and an understanding of the special requirements of CwDs.

While the generalist special educator has enough competence to work across primary school subject areas and also support and complement a subject teacher in middle or high school, a special educator might not have adequate knowledge to undertake subject teaching at higher levels of school. Similarly, a teacher is better prepared for the education of children with singular interests and talents after she has accumulated the required experience. Such areas could be developed as secondary specialisations for generalist teachers after the completion of pre-service teacher training. These will be offered in the in-service mode, as either full time or part-time or blended courses.

## Conclusion

The challenge is, how do we look at future departments of education in multi-disciplinary universities offering a choice-based credit system, options for change and with new combinations?

Kurukshetra University and RCE/RIES of NCERT have run four-year integrated teacher education programmes with specialisations in languages, humanities, sciences and commerce. At one point, even agriculture and other vocational options were also available even at B.Ed. and M.Ed. Elementary. Unfortunately, these institutions never got the chance to award degrees and continue to be affiliated colleges in their respective state universities. We must learn from these experiences, after all, we are accountable to the future generations that our present decisions are going to impact.

While policy-makers and administrators continue to grapple with these issues, CwDs still need us to carry on even at this moment. Let us each abide by the following ideals and champion the cause of the CwDs:<sup>vi</sup>

1. Be a life-long learner and inspire our students to also be the same.
2. Keep in touch with latest developments, such as learning outcomes, continuous and comprehensive evaluation and testing as diagnostic tools; teaching-learning as a continuous and enriching process.
3. Consider Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an empowering process for all children.
4. Believe, recognise and respect that everyone is a responsible citizen and PwDs are also us.
5. Be a game-changer by knowing your strengths and weaknesses, looking for opportunities, being responsive and not prescriptive.

<sup>i</sup> Birrell, Ian. (23 April 2019). *Greta Thunberg teaches us about autism as much as climate change*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-autism/>  
accessed on 21 September 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Smith, M. K. (2015). What is education? A definition and discussion. *The encyclopaedia of informal education*. [<http://infed.org/mobi/what-is-education-a-definition-and-discussion/>]. Retrieved 20 September 2019.

<sup>iii</sup> Portions of this writing are also from Author's chapter on Education of Persons with Disabilities in *Indian Education: A developmental Discourse* by Mukhopadhyay Marmar and Parhar Madhu (Eds), Shipra Publications, 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Will advise all readers to read books by Shivani Gupta, *No Looking Back*, Rupa Publications Pvt. Ltd and Malini Chib, *One Little Finger*, Sage India.

<sup>v</sup> <http://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-05/disabilitiesAct2016.pdf> accessed 22 September 2019.

<sup>vi</sup> Adapted from Mukhopadhyay, Sudesh, *Making the Difference: Our Roles and Responsibilities*. In Verma Preeti et.al. (eds.) (2019); *Be the Difference: Equality and Equity in Education*, Mumbai; Department of Special Education, SNTD.PP332-333.



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