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Education

READINESS STATE OF ARMY PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO EMBRACE THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION MODEL

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ABSTRACT The Sustainable Development Goal 4, adopted by India in 2015, seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all" by 2030. Providing universal access to quality education is also a key to India's continued ascent and leadership on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, national integration, and cultural preservation. Implementing inclusive education can be quite challenging as many barriers continue to hamper progress. Indian Army now envisions graduating from segregated schools to inclusive schools by mainstreaming all children with special needs into the Army Public School ecosystem. An exploratory sequential design was employed in this study to investigate the attitudes, concerns, and sentiments of parents, general teachers, and special educators regarding the implementation of inclusive education in Army Public Schools. The study findings revealed that although the aforementioned stakeholders hold positive attitudes, there was a perceived need for imparting more training and enhancing capabilities with respect to both general teachers and special educators.

KEYWORDS : Inclusive Education, Barriers to Inclusive Education, Army Public School, Attitudes, Concerns, Sentiments

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education In The Global Scenario

Inclusive education is a multidimensional concept that includes the celebration and valuing of difference and diversity, and consideration of human rights, social justice, and equity issues, as well as the social model of disability and a socio-political model of education (Hornby, 2014). Historically, in most parts of the world, Children with Special Needs (CwSN) were neglected till the 18th century. A predominant orientation was that there was no point in providing education to someone who would not contribute economically to society (Bennett, 2020). Then the political reformers of France and America inspired leaders in medicine and education to turn their attention towards the educational needs of such individuals with the idea of fraternity, equality and liberty (Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2017). Subsequently, when the United States and United Kingdom began to establish a legislative context for inclusive education, several developing countries also tried to adjust their education systems to reflect those of the developed World (Selen Durak & Mualla Erkiliç, 2012).

Inclusive Education In The Indian Context

Today, 10% of the world's population lives with disability, and 80% of these people live in developing countries like India (Prasad Sharma, 2019). In India, special education, as a separate system of education, evolved way back in the 1880s. The first school for the deaf was set up in Bombay in 1883, and the first school for the blind at Amritsar in 1887. In 1947, the number of schools for the blind increased to 32, for the deaf to 30 and for the mentally retarded to three (Sanjeev, Kumar, 2007). After attaining independence, the Indian Government developed several policies for providing special education and also attempted to implement them (Sarthaka Singh, 2020).

The Planning Commission, in 1971, included in its plan a program for integrated education (Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2017). In 1987, the Ministry of Human Resources Development, along with UNICEF, had launched a programme, Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2017). India signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and subsequently ratified the same on October 1, 2007. The convention mandated the signatories to change their national laws, to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers, and to comply with the terms of the UNCRPD (Lang, R., Kett, M., Groce, N., & Trani, J. F., 2011). Accordingly, the Government of India undertook an amendment of the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (PWD

Act 1995). The Sustainable Development Goal 4, adopted by India in 2015, seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all" by 2030 (Moyer, J. D., & Hedden, S., 2020).

Inclusive Education In Army Public Schools

In order to address the requirement of CwSN, Asha Schools were established nearly three decades ago. In keeping with CBSE guidelines, a few CwSN were put in mainstream classrooms, with provision for special care. The Army now envisions graduating from segregated schools to inclusive schools by mainstreaming all CwSN into the Army Public School (APS) eco-system (Approach Paper by AWES, n.d.).

In this implementation process, various stakeholders are involved, viz., students, general teachers, special educators, psychologists, school management, external support groups and parents (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). According to the UNESCO (2019) report, the attitude of parents and teachers towards including CwSN into mainstream education was crucial. Hence, this study was carried out to explore the attitudes of the stakeholders towards implementing inclusive education.

Methodology

An exploratory sequential design was used in the study, which started with qualitative research and then used insights gained from qualitative research to frame the design of the subsequent quantitative component. For the qualitative study, a sample of 56 parents, both of CwSN and normal children, and 36 general teachers/ special educators was selected. The data with respect to parents were obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews and through a mailed questionnaire. Separate focus group discussions were conducted to gather data with respect to general teachers and special educators.

A total of 1322 general teachers/ special educators of APS and Asha Schools had participated in the quantitative study. The data for the quantitative study were obtained by using a two-part questionnaire. The first part of the instrument captured the demographic information (Opoku et al., 2021). The descriptors included: teacher group (general teachers or special educators); years of teaching experience; experience working with CwSN; age group; gender; education level; and inclusion training. The second part comprised the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education (SACIE-R) scale (Forlin et al., 2011). Data were collected using online Google Forms (Raju et al., 2018).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of the study were as follows: -

Most parents were positive in their attitudes and expressed their readiness to embrace inclusive education. A few parents were also anticipating improvements in the performance of normal children in an inclusive classroom. While the majority of parents agreed that parental participation was mandatory for achieving success in the process, they also expressed their concerns that general teachers lacked the necessary training and attitude to handle CwSN, and also the requirement to have adequate infrastructure.

A few parents were apprehensive that peer harassment could be a real impediment in an inclusive setup, while others were reluctant to engage CwSN in a normal classroom due to the severity of their disabilities. A few parents of normal children expressed apprehensions that the academic progress of their children might suffer due to a lack of adequate attention from the teachers in inclusive classrooms.

The attitudes of general teachers were found to be positive, and many believed that they possessed the requisite skills and knowledge to execute the process of inclusion. Many teachers stressed the requirement to scale up resources to equip the schools, including the recruitment of assistant teachers. Most opined that normal children would be sensitive towards CwSN. Many emphasised the requirement of training for general teachers and spreading awareness amongst parents.

Attitudes of special educators were found to be positive, with most believing that inclusive education would assist CwSN to lead a better social life. Many expressed their concerns about the lack of parental involvement in the inclusion process, and the lack of skills and attitudes of general teachers to handle CwSN.

The study also found the following: -

- Female teachers were found to be more positive than their male counterparts.
- Younger teachers were found to have more positive attitudes than older teachers.
- Teachers with a bachelor's degree were found to be more positive than teachers with a master's degree.
- Teachers with less teaching experience were found to have a more positive attitude than those with more experience.
- Teachers with inclusive education training and prior experience of teaching CwSN were found to be more positive than those who did not have training or experience.
- Finally, the overall results indicated that the special educators displayed more positive sentiments, attitudes, and concerns than general teachers, and the difference was significant.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that although various stakeholders held positive attitudes, there was a need for imparting more training and capability enhancement with respect to both general teachers and special educators. It emerged that to implement inclusive education effectively, it should not only be a top-driven approach but a pull-model too, wherein; the school management must drive the initiative by equipping the schools and arming the teachers with requisite training (top-driven approach), the school should also be in a state of absolute readiness, by all counts, to welcome CwSN in their classroom (pull-model).

CONCLUSION

Providing universal access to quality education is a key to India's continued ascent to be a developed nation by 2047. Implementing inclusive education can be quite challenging as many barriers continue to hamper progress. Moreover, the process of inclusivity in India is yet to gather the necessary momentum that it deserves. Thus, reconstruction of the education system is not considered an easy mission, especially if the inclusion is based only on the right to education and the right to participate in the same learning program within the same location (Zabeli et al., 2020).

The concept of inclusion has been followed in the APS for quite a long time, and our teachers have, over the years, worked in their own ways with the CwSN (Approach Paper by AWES, n.d.). However, there have been barriers to the implementation process; the major barriers are a lack of training among general teachers and the non-availability of adequate infrastructure. There also exists a need for a paradigm shift in the societal outlook, which will infuse confidence in the parents of CwSN to start sending their children to mainstream schools.

Disclosure Of Interest
The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Consent
Necessary consent from the participants was obtained for undertaking the study. Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

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