Cognitive Disabilities And Inclusive Education In India: Need, Barriers And The Way Forward

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Abstract

Inclusive education has been viewed as an approach to make educational provisions for children with disabilities rather than as education for all. From past 28 years, since the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), various policies have been devised and implemented at international and national levels to endorse the idea of education for all, but there is still a long way to go. In India, disabilities have been frowned upon at societal level and the situation for cognitive disabilities is even worse due to myths and taboos surrounding it. In this paper, economic as well as social aspects of need of inclusive education with reference to Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDG-4) will be discussed. International and national policies pertaining to inclusive education and apparent loopholes in its implementation in India due to vast diversity in terms of degree and type of cognitive disability, and socio-economic as well as cultural factors. Learning from the different countries which have comparatively more successful formulation and implementation of inclusive education policies, the authors will suggest the way forward.

Key Words: Inclusive Education, Cognitive Disabilities, SDGs, Barriers, Educational Policies.

Introduction

India has been grouped under the title of lower-middle income countries by the World Bank. Quite a large proportion of its population has been surviving living in poverty. Education is the only powerful tool to break the vicious cycle of poverty and disability. Social model of disability asserts that disability results from the social norms and social structure that had been constructed keeping in mind the able-bodied people which

inevitably restrict the activities and movements of people with disabilities (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou, 2011). In India, disabilities have been frowned upon at societal level and the situation for cognitive disabilities is even worse due to myths and taboos surrounding it. The stereotypes and adverse attitude towards people with cognitive disability can easily be perceived at every socio-economic strata but the situation becomes grimmer for those living in poverty. The negative attitude, stereotypes and discriminatory practices can only be brought down by empowering the people with disabilities with adequate education and consequently by increasing their participation in every social, economic and political sector.

Inclusive education has been viewed as an approach to make educational provisions for children with disabilities rather than as education for all. Inclusive education comprises of tools and techniques to cater the need of children having varied socio- economic background, geographical and cultural imprint, gender identities and abilities and disabilities within a common educational setting where they all can learn conjointly. Inclusive education intents to ensure that people with disability can exercise their human right as every other dignified member of society and lay the foundation of just society.

Rationale for the study- Kalyanpur (2008) has stated in her study that negative attitude has stricken all the people with disabilities but it is the hardest against mental retardation and girls with disabilities. Further, among all kinds of disabilities, children with cognitive disabilities (e.g. - autism, mental retardation, cerebral palsy) were with the lowest enrolment ratio in schools and if enrolled at primary level then they tend to dropout at secondary level of education (Kalyanpur, 2008; Singal, 2019).

From past 28 years, since the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), various policies have been devised and implemented at international and national levels to endorse the idea of education for all, but there is still a long way to go. Next in this article are the latest strategies and policies that have been formulated to reach the goal of education for all.

Objectives- This article aims to explore current programs and policies pertaining to inclusive education. Moreover, an attempt to identify barriers in the way to inclusive education has also been made.

Sustainable Development Goals and Inclusive Education- As defined by UNDP, "*Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.*" There are 17 SDGs covering each and every area of life on this planet with the aim of developing and sustaining it in ecologically cognizant way. From past five years India has been working under the guiding framework of SGD initiatives. SDG-4 is Quality Education, which is dedicated to '*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'. The targets relating to inclusive education to be satisfied by 2030 are-

- To ensure free, equitable and quality education for all
- To ensure accessibility to all levels of education and vocational training disregard to any disparity in terms of gender, ethnicity, ability or disability
- To build and upgrade infrastructure and educational tools that enrich learning environment for child, disabled and for all gender
- To provide scholarships to the marginalized children and people for increased enrolment in higher education
- To emphasize on teacher training and increase the number of well-trained and qualified teachers

A report by NITI Aayog 'SDG India- Index and Dashboard 2020-21' has revealed that merely 19.3% of persons with disabilities (15 years and above) completed at least secondary education. According to the report, the best performing State is Goa and the best performing union territory is Delhi with 32.4% and 41% respectively, while Arunachal Pradesh is the worst performing state with only 10.3% of persons with disability who have completed secondary education.

National Education Policy, 2020 and Inclusive Education- In India, in order to sustain and move forward in educational domain, National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has been formulated and implemented. Pertaining to inclusive education, this policy rigorously seeks to ensure- equitable and inclusive education at all levels from primary to higher education, to create accessible infrastructure in educational institutions and it emphasizes on vocational education to make persons with disabilities employable (Varma et.al. 2021). NEP-2020, concerning inclusive education conforms to the targets under SGD-4.

Barriers for Children with Cognitive Disabilities- Barriers in laying out provisions for inclusive education for children with cognitive disabilities have been discussed under following categories:

Problems with identification: Cognitive disabilities are covert as compared to sensory impairments and locomotor disabilities. Kalyanpur (2008), has described in her study that due to gender disparity girls in northern and western India tend to be malnourished and it results in mild developmental delay and if persistent, it turns into mild mental retardation, which is not perceived as a disability in their community. Further, in rural Maharashtra, children with hearing impairments and with mild mental retardation who are able to earn bread and butter for their families, were not perceived as disabled.

Data collected in National Sample Survey (NSS) 76th round in 2018 depicted that 76.4 percent of the persons with disability surveyed did not received any aid/help from the government or any other organization. Kalyanpur (2008), has suggested that specific groups such as- children with mental retardation, girls with disabilities are amongst the under-served population majorly due to the problem of identification and labelling. Moreover, children with cognitive disabilities if identified and assessed to be educable, it is quite challenging to convince their parents for their treatment and education as shown in the movie *Taare Zameen Par*.

Educational Barriers: The goal of equitable education for all cannot be attained with disproportionate student-teacher ratio, scarcity of trained teachers and lack of adequate pedagogy and tools. Lack of training render the teachers inept in handling assistive technological devices. In case of marginalized children, teachers must emphasize on their presence and participation in the class rather than on academic achievement. Ainscow (2020) has very rightly remarked that we must 'measure what we value' instead of the prevailing scenario of 'valuing what we can measure'.

Infrastructural Barriers: School premises without boundary walls, nonfunctioning toilets, improper drinking water facilities, classrooms without floors and ceilings, inadequate lighting and uncomfortable seating can be witnessed easily in India. With these infrastructural conditions how can we induce inclusive education for children with disabilities especially with cognitive disabilities? Singal (2019), has reported in her article that *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* Joint Review Mission reports have repeatedly pointed out deficient existing provisions, for instance broken or uneven ramps.

Attitudinal Barriers: As mentioned earlier, cognitive disabilities are stigmatized and surrounded with myths and taboos**,** which dictates the socio-cultural discriminatory attitude against the person with disability. Children with cognitive disabilities often fall prey to bullying and teasing by their classmates and staff (Chowdhury & Mete, 2017). Due to this reason, parents of children with disabilities refrain from sending them to schools (Sarton & Smith, 2018).

The way forward: Education systems does not evolve in vacuum. These are substantially affected by the socio-cultural attitudes and norms, geographical, economic and political conditions and contextual beliefs and values (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Education is the only tool to overcome discriminatory societal attitude towards children with cognitive disabilities. Further, education and training can empower them and make them job-ready, this will increase their number in workforce and in turn, improve their economic condition and increase their participation in socio-political realm.

NSS report (2018) revealed that 58 % of the persons with cognitive disability always required personal assistance in doing daily activities. Schools should focus on sensitizing the non-disabled students about the problems and needs of the children with disabilities, so that they stand with them instead of making fun of them. Trained teachers, counsellors and a group of volunteer students should be prepared to assist the children with disabilities in performing their school activities. This will instill the value of friendship and care among the young generations and students with disabilities will also feel accepted, loved and safe. This might also help in retaining them in schools for secondary education as well.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of identification and assessment is very crucial in developing and sustaining the children with cognitive disabilities. In NSS survey, cognitive disabilities have been covered under '*Mental retardation/ Intellectual disability*', which is further categorized as- '*specific learning disabilities*' (SLDs), '*autism spectrum disorder*' (ASDs) and '*other mental retardation/ intellectual disability*'. Early identification is very important with these cognitive disorders, and if identified early, these can SLDs and ASDs can be treated with therapies and medication.

The author strongly asserts that children with mental retardation should further categories as educable and trainable as per the degree of retardation. As children with mild and moderate mental retardation are considered to be educable. Severely mentally retarded can possibly be trained in non-academic areas. Children with profound mental retardation are totally dependent upon others of their daily routine works so they are neither educable nor trainable. Policy makers and other stakeholders should also consider this classification of level of mental retardation.

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has not been mentioned in the category of cognitive disabilities in NSS surveys despite of prevalence rate of 7.1% among children and adolescence. ADHD is a popular developmental disorder, characterized by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness, which obstruct concentration in classroom activities, educational trainings, attaining various abilities (Joseph and Devu, 2019). Author suggests that ADHD should be included in NSS survey.

Conclusion:

Albert Einstein, Keanu Reeves, Tom Cruise, Abhishek Bachchan, Adam Levine these well-known people what they all have in common is that they are all brilliant in their fields of work and they have suffered from cognitive disabilities at some point in their life. Albert Einstein had learning disability, Keanu Reeves, Tom Cruise and Abhishek Bachchan had Dyslexia and Adam Levine had ADHD. This shows that cognitive disabilities if not severe and identified at early years of life will not hinder in leading respectable life. The aim of inclusive education should not be just to enroll children with cognitive or any other disability but to ensure their participation and growth. For mainstreaming the diversified learners, there is a need of instilling the values of acceptance, empathy and tolerance among those already in the mainstream. By emphasizing on our cultural strength, sensitization programs can help in eradicating prevailing stereotypes and discriminatory attitude towards children/ people with disabilities. This in a big picture, can induce the natural inclusion and consequently more equitable and more just society.

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