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Equitable & Inclusive Education: Reflections from National Education Policy 2020

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ABSTRACT

The accomplishment of an inclusive and equitable society relies heavily on the provision of inclusive and equitable education, allowing every citizen the opportunity to aspire, excel, and contribute to the nation. The global education development agenda reflected in the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by India in 2015 - seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirms that bridging the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school education will continue to be one of the major goals of all education sector development programmes. Inclusive education can be seen as a stepping stone for future inclusive society and a strategy to make education universalized irrespective of any disability within the learner and to sustain equity in the society. NEP 2020 also, encourages, and promotes "barrier free access to education for all children with disabilities. However, for achieving success in inclusive education in India there lie several obstacles and challenges. The present paper focuses on the barriers in inclusive education along with policies, legal framework in inclusive setting. The paper also focuses on the provisions given in NEP 2020 to provide inclusive and equitable quality education. Many problems like, lack of well educated & skilled teachers, curriculum, resources, good infrastructural facilities& related competencies, awareness, positive attitude, improper policy planning & implementation are creating hurdles for extending the concept of inclusive education in India. For the present paper secondary data has been used.

Key words: Inclusive Education, Issues, NEP 2020.

Introduction

The global education development agenda reflected in the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by India in 2015 - seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. Such a splendid goal will require the entire education system to be reconfigured to support and foster learning, so that all of the critical targets and goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be achieved. The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged through undertaking major reforms that bring the highest quality, equity, and integrity into the system, from early childhood care and education through higher education (NEP 2020).

The National Education Policy 2020 envisages an inclusive and structural change in the educational system. It focuses on 'Equitable and Inclusive Education' which reverberates the idea that no child should be left behind in terms of educational opportunity because of their background and socio-cultural identities. It has taken into account the concerns of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) which includes female and transgender individuals, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, minorities and other categories. This policy aims at bridging the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 defines inclusive education as a 'system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities' (RPwD Act, 2016, as cited by Sharma, 2022, p.55)

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a strategy to make education universalized irrespective of any disability within the learner and to maintain equity in the society. Inclusive education is a developmental approach seeking to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (Bhat & Geelani, 2017.p.140). Inclusive education is defined as a learning environment that promotes full personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, colour, gender, disability learning style and language. It

emphasizes that children with special need can be included in general school system without any demarcation and differentiation. (Parveen & Qounsar,2018, p.64).

Inclusion of student with learning differences includes changes and adjustments in content, methodologies, structures and techniques with a typical vision that covers all children of the suitable age and convection that it is the obligation of the standard framework to teach all children.(UNESCO, 2005 as cited by Mishra, Hota & Khamari, 2019, p.70).Inclusive education refers to educational practices wherein child with disabilities will be fully included in the mainstream classroom with same age peers in local school. This also emphasised that the child with disability must expose to all the curricular and co-curricular activities in order to ensure his full participation in the educational process (Sharma, 2022, p.53). The aim of integrated education is incorporation of children with varied capacities into the current classes and structures inside a school and it surfaces as a philosophical anti-thesis to isolation and it enables a child to fit into a pre-existing model of schooling. Inclusion demands high level of teaching aptitude and managerial changes aims at endorsing effective learning that is essential for school (Swamy, 2013). Numerous children with disabilities don't gain admittance to any sort of education. Rather, they are kept at home or are institutionalised on the grounds that families don't get boost from society in raising them or are made to feel embarrassed (Stancis & Vanja, 2009, cited by Begum, 2017, p. 6564). Greater part of common people still experiences issues to acknowledge multiplicity. The ignominy a child with learning differences experiences can be more hindering and excruciating than the distinction itself.

Inclusive education implies that all children, paying little heed to their capacity level, are incorporated into a standard classroom, or in the most suitable or minimum prohibitive condition (MPC), that students of all capacity levels are instructed as equivalents, and that teachers must amend their educational programs and teaching practices with the goal that all students get benefited. For a school to be inclusive, the approaches of each one in the school, including supervisors, teachers, and other students need to be positive towards students with disabilities (Kumar, 2014). According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005), The issues of inclusive education and its implication for education have been under exploration during the previous thirty years. Today, social orders have turned out to be concerned about guaranteeing the educational rights for all children in neglecting seriousness of disabilities into the normal educational setting as regular class students has turned into to be the concern of teachers, governments and the general public at large. Yet the main challenge with reconciliation/inclusion is that mainstreaming has not been connected by changes in the organization of the standard school, its educational modules and instructing and learning procedures. (Begum, 2017, p.6565). This absence of organizational changes has ended up being one the significant obstructions to usage of inclusive policies.

Barriers of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a binding and priority for government of India. However, a wide gap in policy and practice exists in the country with respect to inclusive education. The problems and challenges of inclusive education at primary level are lack of confidence of teachers to teach in inclusive settings, lack of training given to teachers how to teach in the inclusive education, no feedback from supervising officers have been provided about what the teachers are doing, curriculum is not adapted to the needs of special needs children, teaching methodology is not suited to the educational needs of children with special needs (Dash ,2018, p.158). Some of the challenges related to inclusive education by Teena Sarao (2016) with special reference to teacher preparation include- Lack of teacher preparation institutions, Lack of competent teacher educators, Lack of proper strategies to improve practical skill and competency development, lack of adequate pedagogy etc. Sharma (2022) found that main barriers in inclusive education include, positive attitude, school preparedness, resources& support, individualized programme, and flexible curriculum (p.56). There are a number of barriers that hinder proper practice of inclusive education in our country (Sing & Agarwal 2015, pp.186-188). Based on the available literature the barriers of Inclusive education include the following:

Skills of Teachers

Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013) examined the current skill levels of regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi, India in order to teach students with disabilities in inclusive education settings. They reported that nearly 70% of the regular schoolteachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Further, 87% of the teachers did not have access to support services in their classrooms The inefficiency of teachers to develop and use instructional materials for inclusion students (Coskun, Tosun, & Macaroglu, 2009) is also an important issue.

Attitudes towards inclusive Education

Teachers tend to be broadly positive about the principle of inclusion while at the same time viewing its practical implementation as problematic (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) The inclusion of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties has consistently been reported as a particularly problematic for teachers, and is accompanied by negative teaching attitudes (Cook, 2001; Cook, Cameron & Tankersley, 2007). These are children whose learning in the classroom is compromised by complex and long-term difficulties in managing their behaviour, emotions and relationships (Simpson, et.al., 2005). Teachers with negative attitudes believe that inclusion is a burden on teachers and they should receive special service delivery in special education settings to avoid the negative impact on their typically developing peers in the regular classroom (Zambelli & Bonni, 2004;Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2010) investigated Turkish general education teachers working in public elementary schools regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms and their readiness to include students with severe learning disabilities. The results indicated that the teachers had negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular education classrooms.

School Heads and Administrators too have a central role in promoting an inclusive ethos within their schools. This implied that they have a crucial role within their school to communicate their expectations regarding inclusive practices clearly to their teaching staff (MacFarlane & Woolfson,2013). They believe that negative attitudes are quite prevalent among teachers, parents, peers, administrators and policy planners towards disability as well as inclusive education.

School environment including difficulties in physical access

School environment needs accommodations for truly practicing inclusive education. However, such accommodations are not there in majority of the schools. Facilities like ramps, lifts, and directional cues etc. are mostly absent in schools

ICT availability and related competencies

Present age is the age of information and communication technology (ICT). ICT is providing great help in almost all endeavours of human life including education and training. There are a number of ICT-enabled pedagogical and assistive devices are available particularly useful for children with disabilities. Their use can ease and expedite inclusive education. These should be made available and competencies for their use should be developed among all stakeholders.

Improper policy planning and lack proper implementation

The policy planning is improper and measures to assess the degree of implementation have not been developed. Furthermore, implementation of inclusive education in private sector has not been enforced and ensured. Parveen & Qounsar (2018) found that Inclusive Education is still fumbling with problems of proper policy implementation and an environment that is not conducive for practice.

Policies and legislative frame work

The policies and legislative frame work of our country for the betterment of education and inclusion as reported by Begum (2017) include-Action plan for inclusive Education of children and youth with Disabilities (2005), centrally sponsored scheme of integrated scheme education for the disabled. (1974), District primary Education programme (1994),Bahrul Islam committee (1985), National Action Plan (2005), National curriculum Framework (2005), National education policy (1968), National policy for persons with Disabilities (2006), National policy on education (1986), National trust Act. (1999), Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), Programme of action MHRD (1990 & 1992), Project Integrated Education for Disabled. (1987), Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. (2001), Rashtriya Madhyamic Shiksha Abhiyan (2013) and NEP 2020, approved by India's union cabinet in July 2020, which encourages and promotes "Barrier- free access to education for all children with disabilities.

While the Indian education system and successive government policies have made steady progress towards bridging gender and social category gaps in all levels of school education, large disparities still remain - especially at the secondary level - particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups that have been historically underrepresented in education. Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) can be broadly categorized based on gender identities (particularly female and transgender individuals), socio-cultural identities (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and minorities), geographical identities (such as students from villages, small towns, and aspirational districts), disabilities (including learning disabilities), and socio-economic conditions (such as migrant communities, low income households, children in vulnerable situations, victims of or children of victims of trafficking, orphans including child beggars in urban areas, and the urban poor). While overall enrolments in schools decline steadily from Grade 1 to Grade 12, this decline in enrolments is significantly more pronounced for many of these SEDGs, with even greater declines for female students within each of these SEDGs and often even steeper in higher education.

Role of teacher in inclusive education

There is an urgent need for additional special educators for certain areas of school education. Some examples of such specialist requirements include subject teaching for children with disabilities/Divyang children at the Middle and Secondary school level, including teaching for specific learning disabilities. Such teachers would require not only subject-teaching knowledge and understanding of subject-related aims of education, but also the relevant skills for understanding of special requirements of children. Therefore, such areas could be developed as secondary specializations for subject teachers or generalist teachers, during or after pre-service teacher preparation. They will be offered as certificate courses, in the pre-service as well as in-service mode, either full time or as part-time/blended courses - again, necessarily, at multidisciplinary colleges or universities. Greater synergy will be enabled between the course curriculum of NCTE and RCI to ensure adequate availability of qualified special educators who can handle subject teaching as well (National Education Policy, 2020, p.23)

Provisions of NEP 2020 for equitable and Inclusive education

The National Education Policy 2020 envisages an inclusive and structural change in the educational system. It focuses on 'Equitable and Inclusive Education' which reverberates the idea that no child should be left behind in terms of educational opportunity because of their background and socio-cultural identities. It has taken into account the concerns of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) which includes female and transgender individuals, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, minorities and other categories. This policy aims at bridging the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school education. By 2030, the NEP 2020 aims to "provide inclusive and equitable quality education and encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone." Assistive equipment, relevant technology-based tools, and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials will be made accessible to accommodate this new addition to the NEP.

Persons with Disabilities-Divyangjan

The Policy also recognizes the importance of creating enabling mechanisms for providing Children With Special Needs (CWSN) or Divyang, the same opportunities of obtaining quality education as any other child. Because children with benchmark disabilities, as defined by the RPWD Act 2016, will have the option of attending regular or special school, resource centres, as well as special teachers and trainers, will be available to meet the various rehabilitation and educational needs of students with severe or multiple disabilities.

Implementing Steps

NEP 2020 mission focuses on implementing steps for the educational rehabilitation of impaired people.

Recognition of individuals with special needs

The policy acknowledges children with exceptional needs and advocates for their inclusion in regular education systems. It substantially corresponds with The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016's aims. The strategy also aspires to hire special educators in all school complexes so that instruction is more inclusive and sensitive to children's needs.

Creation of Special Educational Zones

The suggestion to establish Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in locations with considerable populations belonging to Socio Economically Disadvantaged Groups and in aspirational districts is one of the NEP's noteworthy recommendations. The main goal is to promote education to India's most distant and far-flung locations. This will be accomplished by injecting additional resources and harmonising several federal and state plans and programmes to change these backward regions.

Support areas to be taken care for the persons with disabilities (Divyangjan)

Support areas to be taken care for the persons with disabilities (Divyangjan) include and are not limited to; Ramp for easy access to the buildings, Lift that makes easy to move up and down in the building without using the staircase, Railing on staircases that would support in walking, Wheelchair for easy movement withing the campus, Disable friendly washroom, Braille books in library, Writers for students with learning disability, Counsellors that guide and support the students, Allocation of extra time in college examinations for LD students, Remedial teaching for LD students, and Workshops sensitizing the needs of the divyangjan.

Learning for all

Ensuring the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in ECCE and the schooling system will also be accorded the highest priority. Children with disabilities will be enabled to fully participate in the regular schooling process from the Foundational Stage to higher education. This Policy is in complete consonance with the provisions of the RPWD Act 2016 and endorses all its recommendations with regard to school education (NEP, 2020, Part-1, Section 6.10).

School complexes/Clusters

To this end, schools/school complexes will be provided resources for the integration of children with disabilities, recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training, and for the establishment of resource centres, wherever needed, especially for children with severe or multiple disabilities (NEP, 2020, Part-1, Section 6.11)

Technology based tools and Supportive devices

 Assistive devices and appropriate technology-based tools, as well as adequate and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials (e.g., textbooks in accessible formats such as large print and Braille) will be made available to help children with disabilities integrate more easily into classrooms and engage with teachers and their peers. This will apply to all school activities including arts, sports, and vocational education (NEP, 2020, Part-1, Section 6.11).

Home education

Home-based education will continue to be a choice available for children with severe and profound disabilities who are unable to go to schools. The children under home-based education must be treated as equal to any other child in the general system. There shall be an audit of home-based education for its efficiency and effectiveness using the principle of equity and equality of opportunity. All the guidelines and standards will be developed as recommended in RPwD Act 2016 (NEP, 2020, Part-1, Section 6.12).

Assessment

Assessment and certification agencies, including the proposed new National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, will formulate guidelines and recommend appropriate tools for conducting such assessment, from the foundational stage to higher education (including for entrance exams), in order to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students with learning disabilities (NEP, 2020, Part-1, Section 6.13).

Any policy's effectiveness depends on its implementation. Such implementation will require multiple initiatives and actions, which will have to be taken by multiple bodies in a synchronized and systematic manner. Therefore, the implementation of this Policy will be led by various bodies including MHRD, CABE, Union and State Governments, education-related Ministries, State Departments of Education, Boards, NTA, the regulatory bodies of school and higher education, NCERT, SCERTs, schools, and HEIs along with timelines and a plan for review, in order to ensure that the policy is implemented in its spirit and intent, through coherence in planning and synergy across all these bodies involved in education.

Conclusion

Global efforts toward inclusive education for children with diverse needs are evident, requiring commitment and competency, particularly from educators. A crucial aspect is ensuring that every teacher understands and embraces the concept of inclusion. The current demand necessitates refining educational systems to integrate children with special requirements seamlessly. This responsibility extends beyond the regular education system, involving collaboration with special curriculum experts, parents of children with special needs, parents of non-disabled peers, students without disabilities, and the wider community. The success of inclusive education hinges on creating barrier-free environments, providing accessible transportation, and enhancing the capabilities of administrators, curricula, assessment methods, and teacher preparation to effectively educate children with special needs. While governmental initiatives exist to boost enrolment, retention, and achievement for children with disabilities, there is a pressing need for coordinated efforts among various organizations, preventing overlap and inconsistencies in program implementation. Community involvement and partnerships between government agencies and NGOs are crucial for promoting inclusive education, and pre-service teacher training should address the education of disabled children. Adequate resources, faculty, and facilities are essential for the success of inclusive education programs at every institution.

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