

Systemic Issues in the Implementation of a State Government Programme for Education of Children with Disabilities in India

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Abstract

The paper presents parts of the findings of a larger multi-hierarchical study, conducted to explore the understanding and practice of the inclusive education framework adopted in the government schools of a state in Northern India. The study was conducted from the perspective of different stakeholders working with children with disability at the school, zone, district, and the state level. The paper examines the gaps in the implementation of the inclusive education framework in the government schools of the state. The key areas of inclusive education being implemented in the government schools in the state are: providing social, physical, and pedagogical access to children with disability (CwSN), and conducting continuous monitoring and evaluation to enhance inclusion of CwSN in the government schools. The main findings of the qualitative study were that there is limited inclusion being practised in the curriculum and pedagogical aspects. Among all the stakeholders, only Special Education Teachers (SETs) receive teacher professional development to practice inclusive education and therefore, they are the only stakeholders who are held accountable and are monitored. The paper concludes by proposing combined training(s) for subject teachers and SETs on inclusive teaching techniques so that CwSN can be fully integrated into the regular classrooms by receiving tutoring support from the subject teachers and the SETs collaboratively.

Keywords: *inclusive education framework, government schools, state functionaries, children with special needs.*

A state government programme in Northern India is providing inclusive education and need-based educational support to children with disabilities in its government schools. The policy of inclusive education is being implemented on the lines of provisions under (The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009) and (The Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016, hereon referred to as the RPwD Act).

The study is an attempt to understand the model of the inclusive education framework practiced in the state government schools and to examine the systemic issues in the education of children with disabilities.

The findings of the qualitative study are established from the perspective, experiences and recommendations of all the major stakeholders at the state, district, zone, and school level who work in the immediate environment of children with disability. Thus, throughout the study, the emphasis was on

comprehending and interpreting the understanding and perspective of the stakeholders who are closely involved in the process of inclusive education in the government school system in the state. Data collection involved conducting observations of regular classrooms with CwSN, and detailed interviews with education functionaries.

On the basis of the observations conducted in three state government schools, interviews with 22 respondents, and a comprehensive literature review of the legislative acts and schemes recommended by the respondents on the field, a conceptual model of the state government programme of inclusive education emerged over the course of the study. The structure of the model relates to four main aspects; first, the legislative acts, rules, and schemes on which the inclusive education model has been established; second, the resources provided by the government to make inclusive education accessible, third, the involvement of major stakeholders who work closely with CwSN to

strengthen the model and fourth, the process of continuous monitoring and evaluation conducted to improvise the model and check its accountability. (Figure 1)

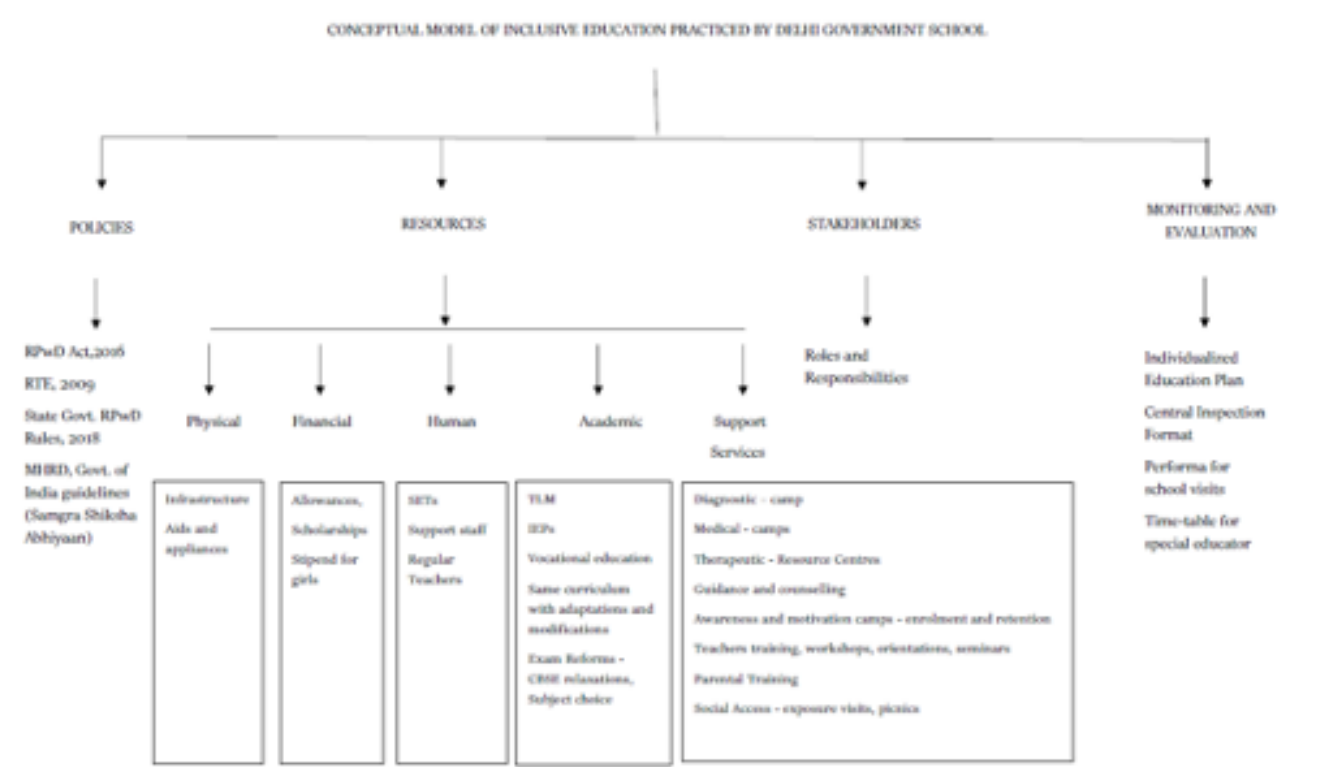


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Inclusive Education Practiced in all the State Government Schools

Firstly, the model is established on the legislative acts, such as RPwD Act, 2016 and RTE Act, 2009 under the Ministry of Law and Justice. Section 31 (1) of the Act¹ practices no denial of admission and age relaxation for children with disability. Anything contained in the RTE Act, 2009, is applied to every child with benchmark disability between the age of six to eighteen years and have the right to free education in a neighbourhood school, or in a special school, of his/her choice.

The state government also integrates Section 31(2) of the Act which makes appropriate government and local authorities provide every child with benchmark disability the access to free education in an appropriate environment till she/he attains the age of eighteen years. Section 16 of the Act makes the appropriate government and the local authorities endeavour that all educational institutions funded or recognised by them provide inclusive education to the children with disabilities. The Head of Schools (HoS) are directed to ensure that Special Education Trainers (SET) are engaged in work related to inclusive education, like preparing time-table for teaching students with disability and displaying it on the notice board, developing of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and

reviewing it frequently, setting up resource room, creating Teaching Learning Material (TLM) and planning and implementing co-curricular activities with CwSN and creating activities to make school environment inclusive. In context to inclusive usage of language, all HoS are directed to strictly follow the recommendations of State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities to discontinue the use of the expressions like 'Handicapped', 'Mentally Retarded', 'Deaf & Dumb' etc. in all official correspondence, letterheads, signboards, government reports and be replaced by the appropriate expressions defined/ used in the Act. Also, disability etiquette should also be popularised amongst teachers and students in schools. In context to create inclusive infrastructure, the Section 16(ii) of the Act, makes the appropriate government and the local authorities, at all educational institutions funded or recognized by them provide inclusive education to the CwD and make building, campus and various facilities accessible like proper ramps, railings, modified toilets, tactile tiles, signages, etc.

The model is guided by the integrated scheme for school education, called Samagra Siksha. It is a centrally sponsored scheme by the Ministry

¹ Here 'ACT' is referred to the RPwD Act, 2016.

of Human Resource and Development, Department of School Education and Literacy. It is a framework for implementation of the various centrally sponsored schemes. One of the major components of the scheme looks into the guiding framework of inclusive education.

Secondly, the model relates to the resources being provided by the central and the state government to strengthen the state's inclusive education model. Those being, physical resources, financial resources, human resources, academic resources and resources for support services.

Physical resources include the provision of the architecturally barrier-free environment so that CwSN has access to classrooms, laboratories, libraries, halls, and toilets in the school; like the construction of ramps, use of tactile tiles, railings on staircase, modified toilets, signages and the provision of resource room and classrooms for CwSN on ground floor. Physical resources also include the provision of aids and appliances and assistive devices to the CwSN as per their need, like the provision of wheelchair for the use at home and 2 wheel-chairs at the entry of the school gate, hearing aids, customized shoes, spectacles, walker, crutches, cushioned chairs, and customized benches.

Financial resources include the provision of therapeutic allowances, transportation allowance, reader allowance, escort allowance, and top-up scholarships to the CwSN as per their requirement. Stipend for girl students of Rs. 500 per month for 10 months to encourage their participation in the school system for all girls with disabilities studying in Classes I to XII is provided.

Human resources include the provision of at least 1 Special Education Teacher (SET) in one school with specialisation in any disability, support staff and the subject teachers of CwSN. SETs work with the CwSN in the resource room in the specific periods prescribed in the timetable. Rest of the time the CwSN spends in the classroom, where the CwSN is under the guidance of the subject teacher. The schools where there is a maximum number of severe and profound cases among CwSN, there support staff are provided to look after the basic needs of the CwSN.

Under academic resources, in the resource room, CwSN is given access to appropriate teaching-

learning material kits for different age-groups and disabilities. The TLM is often developed by the SETs. SETs prepare Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for each CwSN, in consultation with their parents to know the child's current learning level and the child's hidden potential. Vocational training support is provided through IEPs. The same curriculum is followed with adaptations and modifications in learning content, in teaching-learning process and in the TLM. CwSN is also given the provision to get enrolled in NIOS. The examination pattern and the promotion policy for all the CwSN belonging to all the classes remains the same as non-disable students. However, during the examination, CBSE exemptions and relaxations are provided to CwSN, like the scribe/reader/lab assistant facility, compensatory time, choice of mode of examination – written, oral, by using braille or on computer. CwSN is also given to make subject choices from vocational subjects over regular subjects.

To provide other support services to CwSN, diagnostic services and medical services are delivered by conducting diagnostic and medical camps where the students are assessed and their disability is identified. Therapeutic services like speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioural therapy is provided to students. CwSN and their parents are provided counselling and guidance services from SETs. To expand the child's social access, exposure visits and picnics are organized exclusively for CwSN. The students are made to participate in extra-curricular and competitions. CwSN does receive the support of non-disabled students. To avoid panic and hustle among students, CwSN is made to leave 15 minutes early from the school. The students are escorted by the helper from the main gate to the resource rooms and their classroom, to the toilet, from one location to another in the school premises.

HoS and subject teachers are provided with orientations and seminars on sensitization. These orientations help the subject teachers in identifying CwSN in their class and recommending it to the special educator. For SETs, capacity building programs and cross-disability training are conducted. The SETs also engage with non-disable students in the school to sensitize them towards the disabled. Parents of CwSN are also provided with orientation to

understand their children well. Awareness and motivation camps are also conducted in the communities to increase the enrolment and retention of CwSN.

Thirdly, the model relates to the major stakeholders who work with the CwSN at various hierarchical levels are the SETs, subject teachers and head of the schools (HoS) at the school level. Zonal Attaché to the District at the zone level and District Coordinator at the district level. Academic Coordinator, State Coordinator and Deputy Director of Education, Inclusive Education Branch at the state level who work from the Headquarters of Inclusive Education Branch. All the stakeholders apart from the State Coordinator were the respondents to my study, they shared the roles and responsibilities they are involved in, in order to strengthen the inclusive education model of Delhi government schools.

Subject teachers of CwSN shared that their main roles and responsibility include identifying the CwSN in their class, examining their disability, recommending the identified child to the special educator, working on the child's specific learning disability, providing appropriate infrastructure to the child, planning and conducting inclusive activities in a common environment for the whole class, sensitizing other students in the class towards disability. The other responsibilities include helping the child emotionally and physically, to make the child feel important in the class, to give opportunities to the child to express in the class.

Special education teachers (SETs) shared that their major roles and responsibilities include identifying, screening, categorising, assessing, counselling, and working towards achieving the appropriate disability certificate of CwSN. SETs follow the time-table ordered by the DoE, IEB. To provide pedagogical, vocational and co-scholastic support, SETs indulge in creating appropriate TLM, modifying and adapting the regular curriculum according to the needs of the CwSN, creating Individualized Education Plan for each CwSN and revising it in every 3 months, involving the child in co-curricular and competitions SETs. Apart from the ones mentioned, SETs do a lot of documentation work like creating monthly reports, weekly reports, daily diaries, managing the personal data of CwSN. SETs also indulge in sensitizing the school staff and providing guidance and counselling to the parents of CwSN.

Head of the Schools (HoSs) shared that their responsibilities include providing appropriate infrastructure and resources to the CwSN and the SETs. HoSs read all the circulars mentioned to CwSN and sign on all the documents related to CWSN.

Zonal Attaché to the District Coordinator mentioned that their roles and responsibility includes assisting the District Coordinator, conducting school visits, coordinating and following up with the stakeholders at the school - parents, child, teacher, HoS and providing them appropriate guidance and counselling. Their role also includes comprehensive documentation and data collection from the schools in their zones. This involves managing and documenting the work of SETs and achievements of the learning level of the CwSN. They also organise events at district level like, world disability day, medical assessment camps, distribution camps, picnics and exposure visits for CwSN, counselling sessions, awareness and enrolment drives, monthly orientations programs for SETs. Zonal Attachés also work as a grievance redressal person for issues related to CwSN, SETs, parents of CwSN, and support staff.

District Coordinator mentioned that their roles and responsibilities include monitoring and guiding SETs, conducting school visits, checking the implementation of the work at the school level, disseminating the tasks on receiving the circulars mentioned to CwSN, maintaining data record on CwSN in the schools across the district. The District Coordinator also indulges in monitoring the finances related to CWSN like – allowances, stipends, scholarships; organising and administering excursions, interventions, medical camps. District Coordinator responds to the RTIs and court order of Persons with Disability (PwDs). The District Coordinator also works as a grievance redressal person for issues related to CwSN, SETs, parents of CwSN and support staff.

Academic Coordinator explained that his roles and responsibilities can be categorized into two components based on the nature of the work. The two components being hardware and the software. He further explained that the hardware aspect includes the administrative matters related to inclusive education like creating orders and circulars addressed from the Inclusive Education Branch to other stakeholders in the system. He mentioned that the content of the circulars and

orders is created from the issues, concerns, and grievances raised from both the stakeholders at the top of the hierarchy to the ones at the bottom of the hierarchy. The software aspect majorly focuses on the aspects that strengthen the system inside the classroom like the appropriate TLM required, capacity building of subject teachers and SETs, creating timetable for SETs which is integrated within the system, creating orientation and interventions for the stakeholders in the school system, ensuring that stakeholders are in constant contact with each other, example- special educator and subject teacher, special educator and parents, parents and subject teachers. He concluded by revealing that hardware and software responsibilities keep on overlapping.

Deputy Director of Education, Inclusive Education Branch, Delhi shared that his major roles and responsibilities include carrying interventions by MHRD, GOI; creating and issuing circulars and orders, allotting guidelines and allocating finances to the district and state, executing inclusive education framework in the system, executing Delhi government schemes, working as State Grievance Redressal Officer, monitoring private and government education institutions. He further added that within the inclusive education framework, he looks into providing a barrier-free environment in the schools for CWSN, providing resources according to the needs of CWSN and SETs, organising orientations to sensitize various stakeholders in the school system and empowering and strengthening the capacity of CWSN as per their needs. The monitoring and evaluation of the interventions are conducted to know the maximum output.

Fourthly, the model relates to the component of monitoring and evaluation, which is conducted to timely improvise the inclusive model, measure its productivity and check its accountability.

Standardized formats like Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Monthly Reports are mandatorily prepared by SETs and evaluated by the District Coordinators. A standard timetable for SETs is followed to ensure SETs are engaged well in different activities throughout the week. Frequent school visits are conducted by the district office and the state office and the observations are noted in the Central Inspection Format. Central Inspection Format majorly

assesses schools' barrier-free infrastructure, aids and appliances provided to the students, IEPs and daily diaries created and maintained by the SETs, and if SET's schedule is in accordance with the time-table suggested by the system. In the inspection performa all these aspects are recorded. The inspection also includes the inspector conversing with different stakeholders like the CWSN and HoS to receive the feedback on the working of SET. However, in the inspection performa none of these conversations are recorded.

The Inclusive Education Framework

The model of inclusion was adopted by the state government in the year 2014 in all its government schools. The model is broadly practiced in three areas – social inclusion, physical inclusion, and pedagogical inclusion.

The social inclusion aspect includes sensitization of non-disabled students, teachers, Head of the School (HoS) and other school staff towards disabled students through orientation programmes, seminars, and workshops. One of the respondents shared that in practice, *“disabled and non-disabled students sit together in the same environment with the motive to sensitize the non - disabled students towards disabled students and to originate the feeling of help, support and cooperation.”* Physical inclusion includes architecturally barrier-free access to school building for CWSN, making alterations in the infrastructure according to the needs of the student, providing them with need-based aids and appliances, and availing a resource room for all CWSN. Pedagogical inclusion focuses on/includes disabled and non-disabled students learning together in the classroom with the support of a regular teacher. It also includes special educators withdrawing CWSN from the classroom for a specific period and taking the child to the resource room to bridge the gap between the child's current knowledge and the concepts taught in the regular class. This involves creating Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and specific Teaching Learning Material (TLM) for CWSN, providing them with vocational education, making adaptations and modifications to make curriculum accessible and providing Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE) exemptions and relaxations during examinations.

The study found that there is limited pedagogic inclusion being practiced in the schools. Same curriculum and assessment criteria are followed for children with and without disability with just a few adaptations and modifications in the curriculum and few examination reforms are made for CwSN like, limited syllabus up to class 8, the option of subject choice up to class 12th. However, observation of 22 classrooms in three schools during the data collection in regular classrooms showed that no inclusive teaching was practiced, no modifications and adaptations of the curriculum were made, no specific TLM was used, and the CwSN did not sit in the proximity of the teacher. The participants of the research felt the need for a separate curriculum and assessment criteria for CwSN based on the capability and learning of each CwSN. During the interview, a special educator recommended, *“The CBSE syllabus and assessment should be different and as per the need of the child, because when we talk about child-centered learning, we are not following it.”*

During the FGD between the special educators and the subject teachers of CwSN, a special educator shared, *“I have been trying to teach three colours to a child and it is only after 2 years that I can say that the child is confident in remembering the colours.”* In response, the subject teacher said, *“But this is not possible with the regular teacher when there is a pressure of completing the syllabus. Learning three colours won't help the child academically. If anyone comes for the inception that person won't ask the colours from the child but will look at the grades.”* To which the special educator responded, *“That is the reason, there is a demand for a different syllabus for CwSN. If we want to evaluate the child then we have to do it on the child's capability..... along with the CWSN the special educator is also not able to show his/her achievement in the normal syllabus despite working hard with the child.”*

The study also revealed that the inclusive education framework adopted by the schools is integrated and not inclusive in nature. Special educators withdraw CwSN from their classroom for a specific period, and take the child to the resource room to bridge the gap between the child's current knowledge and concepts taught in the regular class. CwSN spend time with the non-disabled students in the classrooms, in the playground, in the co-curricular activities to

develop their social skills, but little attention is paid to their academic skills in regular classrooms. Children in special schools were observed as socially and geographically segregated from their peers, so these children were integrated in the mainstream schools (‘integration’). This further shifted to the whole school approach, where the pedagogy in particular was highlighted as the key to meeting all students’ educational needs by making the curriculum flexible, and so more accessible (‘inclusive education’) (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE), 2007, p. 4). One of the special educators interviewed during the data collection shared, *“80% of the CwSN do not cope with the class, so they cannot be taught the same syllabus. Only the CwSN, who can cope with the classes, are taught the subject, rest are remediate in co-curricular periods. We cannot have a perfect system where 100 percent inclusion and 100 percent learning happens. This system is fine - balances in learning and socializing.”*

Teacher professional development activities and teacher training(s) are only conducted for special education teachers. Special educators receive capacity building and cross-disability hands-on-trainings, but the subject teachers only receive orientation on building sensitization towards CwSN. The knowledge gained at the orientation helps the subject teachers in identifying CwSN in their classes and recommending them to special educators. During data collection, subject teachers and the special educators recommended the provision of teacher training in inclusive teaching techniques for the subject teachers as well. However, subject teachers mentioned that despite learning the teaching techniques and related skills, they encountered challenges such as: large class size, limited teaching time to practice inclusive teaching skills and the pressure of syllabus completion. Also, there is not much interaction between the subject teacher and the special educator to discuss assistance for CwSN. in context of CwSN to receive help and assistance from.

Monitoring and evaluation component is assessed on the quality and quantity of the documents prepared by SETs, and physical accessibility for CwSN in the schools, and not on the learning of CwSN. A major component of the state government’s inclusive education framework relates to the aspect of monitoring

and evaluation, which is conducted to improve the inclusive model, measure its productivity, and check its accountability. Standardized formats like Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Monthly Reports are mandatorily prepared by Special Education Teachers (SETs) and evaluated by the District Coordinators. A standard time-table for SETs is followed to ensure SETs are engaged in different activities throughout the week. Frequent school visits are conducted by the district office and the state office, and observations are noted in the Central Inspection Format. Central Inspection Format majorly assesses schools' barrier-free infrastructure, aids and appliances provided to the students, SETs' IEPs and daily diary and SETs' sincerity towards following the time-table. In the inspection proforma all these aspects are recorded. The inspection also includes the inspector conversing with different stakeholders like, the CwSN and HoS to receive the feedback on the functioning of the SET. However, in the inspection proforma none of these conversations are recorded. Also, neither the resource room nor the classrooms of CwSN are visited to observe and record the learning of the child, execution of IEPs, practice of inclusive teaching strategies and the adaptations or modifications in the curriculum according to the needs of CwSN. The study found that while the process of monitoring the programme is quite rigorous, it fails to take into consideration the actual classroom interactions and the experiences of teachers, CwSN and their peer group in the daily implementation of the programme.

Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper are a part of a larger research study undertaken to examine two main aspects of the inclusive education programme being implemented in government schools in a state in Northern India, namely, the conception of inclusion and the practice of inclusive education framework, and to identify the gaps in the implementation of the programme, if any. The findings revealed that several initiatives have been taken to ensure

physical inclusion and social inclusion of children with disabilities. However, only limited inclusion is being practiced in the pedagogical aspect, rendering the programme integrated rather than inclusive in nature. Teacher training is emphasized only for SETs to practice inclusive education and not for regular school teachers. Monitoring and evaluation is limited to assessing the quality and quantity of the documents prepared by SETs and physical accessibility for CwSN in the schools, but not on the actual learning of CwSN or the classroom processes or pedagogical adaptations being carried out by the teachers.

With an aim to enhance the pedagogical inclusion of CwSN, recommendations for reforms addressing the students' learning needs within the context of a regular classroom are proposed by the researchers of this study. Integrated teacher training(s) for SETs and subject teachers on inclusive teaching techniques can be conducted to empower them to work collaboratively with CwSN. The state Inclusive Education Branch can re-look at its monitoring and evaluation policy of the inclusive education framework as it is largely based on assessing the physical inclusion aspect and the documents prepared by the SETs; instead of assessing the learning of CwSN based on the implementation of the IEPs alone. The evaluation of inclusive education programme can be conducted at other levels as well – institutional performance, teacher performance as well as student performance which can be assessed by educational officers who understand inclusive school practices. In order to assess performance of the child, alternative assessment based on the child's individual progress can be used instead of standardized tests as a primary indicator of success. In conclusion, while it is laudable that the state government has taken several initiatives in order to bring children with disabilities into the regular school system, it would be useful for them to review some of their processes in order to implement the policies more effectively.

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