

POLICY PERSPECTIVES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
THE POLICIES ON THE EDUCATION OF SPECIFIC LEARNING
DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper covers the perspectives as well as current policies related to individuals with special needs. Education of individual with special needs has been progressing through different phases. History is witness to the long span of time from 19 to 21st centuries, which has not been an easy path although rigorous efforts and positive thinking and humanistic perspective brought changes in educational treatment of special children to some extent. Even now society and educational system still need to be developed to understand human differences with acceptance, empathy and positive expectation.

Keywords: Special Education, Learning Disability, Special Education policies, legislation, and International declarations.

INTRODUCTION

The system of education has been undergoing evolutionary changes. It has progressed from a one size fits all perspective to a classroom that accommodates children with different learning and cognitive styles.

Looking back at the history of education, the journey of special education started meaningfully somewhere in the 19th century after the WWII because many war veterans had become physically disabled due to the loss of their limbs.

Administrators began working towards rehabilitation of these war veterans. This led to a change in society and people with special needs began to be accepted gradually. Pioneers in this field like Pedro Ponce, Michel de Eepe, Itard, Louis Braille, Seguin, Montessori and Decroly labored tirelessly to fill beautiful colours in the lives of persons with special needs.

Modern special education practices can be traced to Itard (1775-1838), the physician who “tamed” the “wild boy of Aveyron”. His work marks the beginning of widespread attempts to instruct student with special needs. Although Itard failed to normalize Victor, he did produce dramatic changes in Victor’s behaviour through education.

In the nineteenth century, compulsory education came to be confirmed for the abled as well as persons with special needs. But it was believed as in ‘medical model’ that disability results from physical or mental limitations of the person, needs to be corrected and cure and rehabilitation services must be provided to people with special needs.

The thoughts have been reformed with the emergence of ‘social model’ for which disability is the consequences of environment, society, and attitude of people. Still more efforts, reform, and development would be needed to make the planet feasible for the disabled, so that the people with disability can easily be accepted in society.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health(ICF) is a categorization of health and health-related domains. ICF was adopted as the conceptual framework by WHO for study of health and disability. It attempted to understand disability as the confluence of health conditions and situational or social factors such as personal and environmental. This was named as “bio-psycho-social model (definition of disability, 2009).

Valuable human right or humanist model confers respect on the disabled which they are entities to by virtue of being human. This right based model focuses more on achieving human dignity rather than on disability.

Many concepts are used in the area of *Special Education* (*specially* designed instruction to meet the unique needs of special children) which need to be spelt out for purpose of clarity. Some of these are

Exclusion which implies a situation in which special children are kept isolated from society and education.

Segregation implies educating student with special needs with their special needs peer only.

Integrated education in which students with special needs are placed with the non-disabled in a mainstream school. The school system remains inflexible and unchangeable. In this system the onus to adjust to the prevailing system is on the child with special needs.

Inclusive Education implies placement of students with special needs in an age appropriate classroom with other peers or students with distinctive ability, caste, class, gender, language and culture etc. The system has to own the responsibility of catering to the needs or special needs of all children.

SIGNIFICANT INTERNATIONAL DECLARATION TO ACHIEVE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The most powerful means of social change is education which helps to bridge the gaps among different sections of society. The education system has been undergoing changes consistently being influenced by international initiatives that were taken from time to time, some of which are as below:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) – This declaration was an attempt to give all rights to humans which they are needed to peaceful and dignified life.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) - This convention focused primarily on children. Children were bestowed with the rights: to live, to survive, to protection and to Education.

World Declaration on Education for All (1990) - World Conference on Education for all was held in Jomtien, Thailand from 5-9 March in 1990 for making primary education accessible to all children and reducing illiteracy.

The World Declaration on Education for All was adopted, which supported the belief of education as a fundamental human right and advised that basic learning needs of all be

dealt with by the year 2000. The goals included: universal access to learning, equity, attainment of learning outcomes, provision of suitable environment for learning and strengthening of partnerships.

Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability (1993)

- The General Assembly set out Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities on the basis of moral and political commitment to accomplish equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities and cover all aspects of the life of disabled persons. But the instrument has not legally been enforced.

UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) - The World Conference on Special Needs Education was organized in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994. The Conference established the right to education for all. Around the world, different developed and developing countries adapted their policies to support the philosophy of inclusion.

Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

The World Education Forum (26-28 April 2000, Dakar) adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, for achieving Education for All by the year 2015. Six key measurable goals of education, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, were acknowledged which may be summed up as : expanding early childhood care and education ensuring free and compulsory primary education to all, particularly to girls and children in difficult circumstances; equitable access to quality education and life skills for young people and adults and ensuring excellence ; eliminating gender disparities and achieving gender equality.

Through the landmark *Individual with Disability Education Act (IDEA)* in America, the needs of students with learning disability were specially catered and it is worthwhile trace the chain of thoughts behind this initiative. This is a federal law of America. It has four sections: Section A clarifies the term 'specific learning disability', section B deals with money matters, section C focuses on early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Services such as counseling, family training, home visits, occupational therapy, speech-language services, and physical therapy and section D

pays attention on the improvement of departments and agencies. A chronology of the steps taken in this direction is provided below

1975 — The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) became a law for providing education to special needs students. In 1986, infant and toddler component was added and in 1990, transition planning became a requirement.

1990— IDEA first came into being on October 30, 1990, when the "Education of All Handicapped Children Act" was renamed "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act." (Pub. L. No. 101-476, 104 Stat. 1142). IDEA received minor amendments in October 1990, and in 1990, transition planning became a requirement.

1997— IDEA received significant amendments. The definition of disabled children expanded to include developmentally delayed children between three and nine years of age. The amendments authorized additional grants for technology, disabled infants and toddlers, parent training, and professional development. (Pub. L. No. 105-17, 111 Stat. 37).

2004— On December 3, 2004, IDEA was amended by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Several provisions aligned IDEA with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Assistive technology was focused upon in the law, and it was stated that ‘Government entities and public accommodations, however, must provide certain devices and services when you need them for full and equal access to their programs, services, and goods’. (Assistive Technology and Title II and Title III of the American with Disability Act, 2014)

The school districts were no longer required to wait for child fallen behind in grade levels before getting special education but could find other ways to determine when a child needed extra help. This is being implemented throughout the country through a process called Response to Intervention. “The term ‘specific learning disability’ means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

Such term **includes such conditions as** perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

Such term **does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of** visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.”

POLICIES AND LEGISLATIONS IN INDIA

In pre-independent India, there were limited services for persons with special needs which rose largely out of non-government organizations and were often religious. The first special school was a school for the blind, opened in 1869 by Jane Leupot. Fourteen years later, in 1883, a school for the deaf was opened in Bombay. In 1887, a school for blind was set up in Amritsar with the help of Christian missionaries. During the 19th century, all of the schools for persons with special needs accommodated children with physical disabilities. It wasn't until 1918 that the first school for the students with intellectual disabilities was setup.

In the first half of 20th century, the political figurehead and leaders of Satyagraha movement, Gandhi ji attempted to reverse British influence over Indian education by introducing the term 'basic education'. His idea catered to the marginalized population as it focused on handicrafts, which favoured the Dalits and persons with special needs.

In 1909, an attempt was made to introduce a bill for the compulsory primary education. The policy and actions by the government of India in the area of inclusive special education contradicted each other entirely. The *Sargent report* (1944) by central advisory board of education suggested mainstreaming children with special needs but the action and inaction by the government contradicted this suggestion.

The government of India set up segregated workshops and vocational schools separated from mainstream schools. Most of these segregated schools were expensive and were in cities resulting in further marginalization of person with special needs.

The Kothari commission was created to improve the education system. The plan of action (POA) that followed included the concerns of people with disabilities but unfortunately the government never implemented it. It reads “We now turn to the education of handicapped children. Their education must be organized not merely on

humanitarian grounds but on grounds of utility. Proper education generally enables a handicapped child to overcome largely his or her handicap and make him into a useful citizen. Social justice also demands it...on an overall view of the problem, however, we feel that experimentation with integrated programs is urgently required and every attempt should be made to bring in as many children in integrated programs".

In 1974, the ministry of welfare initiated the Integrated Education of Disabled Children Scheme. This program provided children with special needs "financial Support for books, school uniforms, transportation, special equipment's and aids". But due to major problems such as lack of training and experience of teachers as well as lack of availability of equipment and educational materials, the scheme could be implemented in only 10 out of 29 states.

The NPE 1986 stated in contradiction of article 45 that only children with mild disabilities should be included in mainstream classroom, whereas children with "moderate to severe" disabilities be placed in segregated special schools.

The 1992 Program of Action (POA) created to implement the 1986 NPE, clarified that "a child with special needs who can be educated in general school should not be placed in special schools".

The Year 1992 was also the year of rehabilitation council of India (RCI) Act. It provides standards for rehabilitation professionals with the inclusion of Special educators as well.

In 1995, the Person with Disability Act was passed which covered all aspects of disability related areas ranging from building to education as well as jobs, but it defined the disabilities quite narrowly. It only listed seven categories.

The act addressed the issue of teacher training for special educators and required that all schools have facilities that accommodate students with various needs. But due to lack of funds the PWD Act was virtually impossible to implement.

Right to Person with Disability Act (2016)

The PWD (1995) act only had seven disabilities and 3% reservation but RPWD act ensures the equal right for children with special needs. Types of disabilities have been increased from 7 to 21. Disabilities defined as per the RPWD Act (2016) are: Blindness,

Low-vision, Leprosy Cured, Hearing Impairment (deaf and hard of hearing) Locomotor Disability, Dwarfism, Intellectual Disability, Mental Illness, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Muscular Dystrophy, Chronic Neurological conditions, Specific Learning Disabilities, Multiple Sclerosis, Speech and Language disability, Thalassemia Hemophilia, Sickle Cell disease, Multiple Disabilities, acid attacks, and Parkinson disease. Reservation now stands at 4% for the persons for special needs. The RPWD act classifies disabilities into three categories :“person with benchmark disability” means a person with not less than forty per cent”; “person with disability” means a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others; “person with disability having high support needs” means a person with benchmark disability certified under clause (a) of sub-section (2) of section 58 who needs high support. (RPWD, 2016)

The act provides for imprisonment for humiliating a person with special needs but ‘within public view’. It is however silent on their hidden victimization. Although the reservation is 4%, it needs to be pondered if it would be able to appropriately cater to 21 disabilities and benefit the most needful special persons.

Resolution of issues related to certification of special ability, resource centers for diagnosis, occupational & speech therapy and trained professionals are prerequisites for the successful implementation of this act.

A huge gap in policy, implementation and practice especially in developing countries continues to pose a major challenge. The practice of segregated education had separated special children from mainstream and was not found to be cost effective. Integrated education became a new hope for integrating special children in general schools with no expense of separate school, but no attention was paid to teaching learning. Finally, the philosophy and practice of inclusion came into existence as a refined solution for cost effectiveness, teaching learning considerations, including all children of appropriate age in a class and no denial of admission. However, this system will be questioned for learning of severely special children. Trials of innovative strategies, such as UDL (universal design of learning, differentiated instruction and peer mediated learning, are

currently taking place, but still teaching to special children needs to overcome strong barriers like those of infrastructure and attitude of teachers, parents, peers, colleagues etc. Many states began work in this direction, but the practice of integrated education is still largely being followed.

CONCLUSION

With the Salamanca statement, India had started to work towards integrated education and further towards inclusive education. Work for the betterment of special children began before independence but major work in the area was gradually seen only after independence. Many legislative measures have been taken for children with special needs, even though a majority of such children are out of schools. New concepts such as universal design of learning, differentiated instruction cross disability approach, peer mediated learning have emerged as attempts towards realizing the ideal of inclusion. Although nature of special education has reached the level of 'integration' but total inclusion remains elusive. For accomplishing the rights of the disabled, total inclusive education is inevitable for which social, environmental, attitudinal, and instructional barriers have to be overcome and there is an urgent need to revise and implement the policies on time.

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