

PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS (CWSNs) IN ACCESSING THE EDUCATION: ROLE OF BARRIER FREE ENVIRONMENT – A CASE STUDY OF INDIA

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Abstract. Education is envisaged as an important tool for the socio-economic and cultural development of an individual and acts as a catalyst for the pace of the development of the country. Keeping this in view, the Government of India has launched several programmes for the promotion of the education among the children as well as adults in the country. But, due to the mal-nutrition, superstitions, fluoride in the water, diseases like polio etc., natural calamities and other adverse conditions some children are becoming disabled. The place of the differently abled in the Indian society is lower when compared with the normal children as there is a notion that their disability is due to curse for the sins in the previous birth etc. and they were deprived in all spheres of life including education. To mainstream them on par with the normal population and to make them as partners of the pace of development of the country, the Government of India from time to time launched several programmes and started special schools. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is one of the programme implemented to create barrier free environment in the school and to promote inclusive education for the children with special needs (CWSN) as

one of the components,. The present study was taken up in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India to find out the extent of accessibility of education to the CWSNs in normal schools, The study covered a sample of CWSNs (300), teachers (90), parents (150), heads of the schools (30), home based teachers (30) and tried to identify the problems of the CWSNs in accessing the education, problems of the teachers in tackling with the children, parents' opinions towards the efforts of the schools in making education to be accessible to their CSWN.

Keywords: disability, children with special needs, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, barrier-free environment, disabled-friendly environment, problems

Introduction

Recognizing the importance of education in promoting all-round development among the individual and the country as a whole, the Government of India has launched several educational programmes. One such programme is Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for Universalization of Elementary Education(UEE) in the form of access, enrollment and retention of the children in the age group of 6-14 years in the schools. Further, the programme is also intended to facilitate the constitutional obligation of making free and compulsory elementary education as fundamental right of the school aged children. The 86th Amendment of the Constitution has prophesied a new thrust to the education of the children with special needs (CWSN) without whose inclusion; the objective of the UEE cannot be achieved. Hence, education of the CWSN has also become an important component of SSA. It has determined to ensure that every child with special needs, irrespective of kind, category and degree of disability should be provided meaningful and quality education. It has adopted a zero reduction policy.

As a result of this, the intervention of SSA for inclusive education are identification, financial and formal assistance, appropriate placement, preparation of individualized educational plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, resource support, removal of architectural barriers to create barrier free environment in the schools, research, monitoring and evaluation with a special focus on girls with special needs. All these interventions are aimed at creating barrier free education for the CWSN to make education accessible to them.

The challenge of the education of the CWSNs seems to be the coverage of them i.e., 2.1 percent of the total population. Among them only 1.54 per cent has been covered, but, could not be retained successfully. Further, the assistive devices could not be supplied to all the identified children and the support of the NGOs is found to be low, only 47.14 percent schools have been made barrier free. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, the state has identified 1,38,467 CWSN and covered 1,27,851 only. There are 647 resource teachers and aids and appliances were provided to 97,077 children and 78 NGOs have been involved in the programme. There are 79,754 schools with CWSN and out of them, 16,898 were made barrier free access schools i.e., only 21.19 percent. Keeping in view the above backdrop, an attempt has been made to study the measures taken to create barrier free environment in the schools for the CWSN.

The studies conducted in the area by various researchers such as Banerjee (1988), Khan (1988), Sahoo (1991), Mandravalli (1991), Kapoor (1990), Sharma (1989), Verma, (2002; 2004), Julka (2005a; 2005b), Soni (2003; 2005a; 2005b), Singh (2004), Seetharam (2005), Chudasama et al. (2006), Venkatesh (2006) have thrown light on some of the problems of the children with special needs. But they are very scanty and very few attempts have been made to study the performance of the integrated schools in promoting the inclusive education and the opinion of the stakeholders for main-

streaming the CWSNs. The problems encountered in this process have not given adequate attention. Hence, the present study was taken up in this direction with the following objectives.

Objectives of the study

(i) To identify the profile of the CWSN attending the schools; (ii) To assess the problems of the CWSN in attending and integrating with the classroom activities; (iii) To identify the measures taken by the teachers in inclusion of the CWSN (iv) To identify the interventions of the SSA in inclusive education policy in the school; (v) To assess the problems of the teachers in creating barrier free environment for inclusion of the CWSN; (vi) To study the awareness of the parents of the CWSN about the measures taken by the teachers in creating barrier free environment; (vii) To study the perceptions of the parents about the psychological inhibitions of their children in integrating with the school environment (viii) To suggest suitable strategies for creating barrier free environment in the schools as perceived by the parents and teachers.

Research questions

In the light of the above, the following research questions were framed: (1) what is the profile of the Children with Special Needs attending the schools; (2) what are the problems of the Children with Special Needs in attending the schools and in integrating with the class room activities; (3) what are the measures taken by the teachers in inclusion of the CWSN; (4) what are the interventions introduced by the SSA in promoting inclusive policy in education in schools; (5) what are the problems of the teachers in creating barrier free environment for inclusion of the CWSN; (6) what is the level of awareness possessed by the parents of the CWSN about the measures taken by the teachers in creating barrier free environment; (7) what are the percep-

tions of the parents about the psychological inhibitions of their children in integrating with the school environment; (8) what are the suggested strategies for creating barrier free environment in the schools as perceived by the parents and teachers.

In order to provide answers to the above research questions, there is a need to collect primary and secondary information from different sources. For collecting the primary data, the following methodology was adopted for developing the tools, selecting sample, collection of the data, analysis to draw the inferences.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The state of Andhra Pradesh has two clear-cut geographical regions viz., Rayalaseema and Coastal Andhra. There are 9 districts in Coastal Andhra and 4 in Rayalaseema. As the study was conducted in two regions, two districts from Coastal Andhra viz., East Godavari and Visakhapatnam and one district from Rayalaseema viz., Kurnool having highest number of CWSN in the schools were chosen in the first stage of sample selection.

For the purpose of the present study, three divisions in each district were chosen. From each division, 10 mandals having highest number of CWSN were selected. From among the CWSN in the selected mandals, 33 children were selected randomly as sample of the study. Further, the parents, teachers of the concerned children, Head teachers of the schools having sample CWSN, home based teachers were also constituted as sub sample of the study. Thereby, the sample selected for the study includes CWSN (300), teachers (90), parents (150), Heads of the Schools (30) and home based teachers (30). Thus the total sample comprises to 550.

Data gathering devices

The study is intended to identify the measures taken for creation of barrier free environment in the schools. Hence, there is a need to collect the primary data from various sources such as the schools, students, teachers and parents involving both qualitative and quantitative information relating to the barrier free environment. Keeping in view of the objectives of the study, the investigator has devised different schedules for eliciting information from the schools, CWSN, teachers, home based teachers and parents. These schedules were presented to the elite for reviewing its validity. Further, got approval from the officials and other researchers of SSA projects and incorporated the suggestions. In addition, the investigators also collected the information about the physical environment created for the CWSN in the schools through observation during their visits to the schools. The tools thus developed are: (i) Schedule for the schools having CWSN; (ii) Schedule for the children with special needs attending the schools; (iii) Questionnaire for the teachers; (iv) Schedule for the parents of the CWSN; (v) Questionnaire for the home based teachers; (vi) An observation inventory for the investigators.

Data collection and analysis

The tools thus developed were administered to the respective sample by engaging the field investigators. Before administering the schedules, the field investigators were trained for two days on the methods to be adopted and way and means for eliciting the required information from the sample. Further, the Inclusive Education Coordinators of the selected districts were also consulted for their cooperation in getting the primary data from all the stakeholders. The data thus collected was of both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Hence, the investigator has analyzed the data by using descriptive techniques. The data relating to the number of CWSN, measures taken to enrol the children, creation of barrier free environment etc., were collected from

the secondary sources and was used as per the requirements of the study. The objective-wise findings of the study are as follows.

Findings of the study

(I) The Government of Andhra Pradesh has implemented a number programmes for the welfare of the differently abled viz., Homes for the CWSN, Pre and Post Matric Scholarships, Vikalangula (disabled) Cooperative Corporation, Economic Rehabilitation, Pensions, Subsidy in Petrol / Diesel Purchases, Special Incentives for Marrying the Differently Abled People, Residential Bridge Centres, Home Based Training, Supporting NGOs, Free and Compulsory Education, Special Schools, Reservations in Education and Employment, Integrated Education Centres, Relaxations in Payment of Examination Fee etc.

(II) There are 176344 school aged CWSN in the State (girls - 79236 and boys - 97108). Out of them, 148328 are enrolled in the schools (girls - 64820 and boys – 83508) followed by Residential Bridge Centres, (3328 girls- 1421 and boys - 1907) and 10872 are in home Based Education

(III) The profile of the sample CWSN attending schools shows that majority of them are boys (65.67%), in the age group of 13-15 years (36.33%), studying in primary education (40%) and secondary education (38.33%), having 4 family members (40%), having 91 percent disability (42.70%), able to do their own work without depending on other's support (51.33%) and mother is the major supporter at home and teachers at the schools. Majority of the sample CWSN revealed that there are no CWSN at their home, and they are not facing any difficulty while receiving support from others.

(IV) Among the sample, 93 per cent of the children are attending the schools regularly and 21.67 per cent of them have problems viz., lack of transport, daily assignments, need support for climbing the steps, require tricycles, crossing the roads and financial difficulties. The difficulties experi-

enced by the children in the schools are lack of facilities such as suitable classrooms, seating arrangements, drinking water, Braille books, teaching aids, special toilets, bath rooms, stick, slider stickers, abacus, C.P. Chairs, tailor frame, etc.

(V) Majority of them does not face any problem in mingling with the normal students. However, a minority of the students have experienced problems such as not able to hear, speak, compete with others, not able to write, difficult to remember and understand quickly etc. It is easy to mingle with the peer group, does not face any discrimination and understands the lessons without any difficulty. The teachers are treating and motivating them on par with normal children and takes care of them without any discrimination. The schools have provided ramps, adequate furniture, U shaped tables, walking sticks, arm chairs, speech therapy, wheel chair, higher wire benches, television, tape recorder, toilets, etc., The additional facilities required for the classrooms are walking sticks, group hearing aids, musical classes, computer classes, physiotherapy, special chairs and tables, audio-video tapes, hearing aids, tri-cycles, i-pads, gym and yoga centre, hearing machines, caroms, group learning, special toilets, U shaped tables, arm chairs, speech therapy, Braille watch, delicious food and swing.

Teachers

(VI) Majority of the teachers have indicated that they have undergone training to teach the special children. The training received is of short-duration ranging from 5 days to 3 months. Some of the prominent courses attended by them are early intervention, special schools, special education, Diploma in Braille training etc. On the whole, the training received is short-duration and need to retrain them to become proficient in the field.

(VII) According to the teachers, majority of the normal children are willing to mingle with the CWSN (83.33%), need for the A-V aids (88.89%)

and 87.78 percent are procuring them from school funds followed by self preparation and from other sources. One third of them felt difficult to teach simultaneously to the normal and CWSN children. Physiotherapy is being provided to the students (55.55%) and it has increased the health status of the CWSN (78%), self confidence (82%), improved their regularity (82%). More than half of the schools (58%) are having physiotherapists.

(VIII) The schools have conducted the awareness programmes for the parents and this has increased their responsibility as parents. The teachers have taken measures to improve the enrollment of the CWSN through conducting field level survey during summer vacations. The volunteers, teachers, doctors, CWSN societies were used as agents for enrolling the students and for conducting medical camps.

(IX) The problems faced by the teachers are : the CWSN are not able to understand the content easily, hearing impairment, not able to understand the behaviour, conversation, teaching through Braille, repeated teaching, lack of special A-V aids, etc.,

Parents

(X) The personal profile of the parents of the CWSN shows that majority of the parents belongs to men, high school educated, agriculturists, low income groups. Further, the parents have additional income of Rs.2000/- per month. There are on or average 4-5 members in each family. Majority of the families have only one CWSN person, nature of the disability shows that they are blind followed mentally retarded and orthopedic disability. There are persons with low vision, dumb and deaf and multiple disabilities.

(XI) It is understood from the parents that there is no discrimination at the school. The teachers are viewing it seriously and punishing the defaulter. Majority of the parents does not face any difficulty in enrolling the CWSN. The schools require additional facilities (73.33%) such as Braille books

(33%), wheel chairs, hearing aids and walking sticks. Further, parents identified that facilities such as bedding in hostel, toilets, A-V Aids such as tape-recorder, i-pad, playing materials, gym abacus facilities, reading facilities, computers are required. However, the percentage of the facilities indicates that the schools do not have adequate facilities for facilitating the CWSN in their studies.

(XII) The parents felt that the students were able to understand the instruction of the teachers, support the children in their studies, makes the learning easy by using teaching aids, encouraging the students to mingle with the other section of the students without any reservations, teachers are taking special interest on the CWSN, using innovative teaching methods, taking special classes and also uses the special teaching aids. The type of support extended by the teachers to the CWSN as viewed by the parents shows that the teachers are dedicated to the teaching of the CWSN, uses visual aids, focuses on special students, preparing and purchasing Braille books suitable to the blind and low vision, prepares and uses audio-visual aids in the curriculum transactions, assigns the copy writing, prepare model papers, provides notes to the students, conducts examinations, trained as special teacher, creates friendly atmosphere. In addition, some of them felt that conducts competitive examinations, organizes extra classes, uses teaching- learning materials, computers, provides home tuitions, provides vocational education and training to promote the skill development.

(XIII) The parents indicated (26.67%) that the physiotherapist taking special interest on the CWSN, visits the residence of the children and it has improved the health status, self-confidence and regularity to the schools. This is an indication that the physiotherapy plays an important role in improving the health status and confidence among them leading for their regularity.

(XIV) Further, the parents also felt that their children are able to understand the lessons taught by the special teachers, attended the schools regu-

larly, teachers are making the teaching-learning attractive by using teaching aids, dedicating more time for the CWSN in the schools, organizing parents awareness programmes which has led to the shouldering of higher responsibility of the parents. The schools are creating conducive environment to overcome the disability. The peer group and family members are also encouraging the CWSN to mingle with the normal children. The parents are also aware about the extent of time dedicated by the teachers and special care taken to increase the learning capacity of their children. It is also understood from the parents that the schools are also providing Braille books, wheel chair, walking sticks and hearing aids, encourages the CWSN to mingle with the normal children to overcome the disability.

Schools

(XV) Majority of the schools are covering the students having more than one disability. The schools possessed facilities such as ramps, wheel chairs, audio-visuals, speech therapist, physiotherapist, health facilities, T.V., tape recorder, material kits, etc., In addition, the schools are also provided with the facilities like multi-orphan stimulators, group hearing aids system, individual hearing aids, digital classrooms, railings, braille charts, braille slates, etc., depending on the nature of the disabilities. The schools do possess the equipment like wheel chairs, walking sticks, VET programmes, braille books, charts, slates, T.V., tape recorder, The Schools have organised regular health check-up, separate toilets for boys and girls, yoga, meditation and augmentation.

(XVI) The facilities possessed by the schools shows that they have created barrier free environment in the school buildings, equipped with ramps, railings, electrified with fans. In terms of physical facilities, there are well ventilated rooms along with T.V. Radio, tape recorders, sports kits, physiotherapy facilities. The schools are also organizing vocational education and

training programmes etc., The schools are provided with competent and qualified special teachers to take care of the special children. There are separate toilets for girls and special toilets for special students.

(XVII) Only half of the schools (56.70%) were visited by the IERC teachers. The frequency of the visits ranges one time in a week is (46.67%), w 2 and 3 times in the case of 3.30 and 6.70 per cent of the schools respectively. One third of the schools indicated that the IERC teachers are handling the classes; two thirds of them are casually visiting the schools for sake of duty. The frequency of the visit of the physiotherapist in a week is daily in case of 53.30 per cent of the schools and 2 and 3 times in case of 10 per cent and 5.70 per cent respectively. However, in one case it is once in a month. The schools have expressed satisfaction about the facility of the physiotherapist.

(XVIII) Majority of the schools (93.33 per cent) indicated that the teachers are using A-V aids. The required teaching-learning materials indicated by the schools are : Braille slate books, charts, books and software for the blind for reading, internet facility, CD's, concept oriented books, play cards, etc., In addition, the facilities like e-class room, reading chairs, hearing equipment are required for facilitating for their academic endeavors. The source of supply of the material required for the special schools are found to be Government/school resources (40%), followed by students(20%), NGO's (16.67%), community (3.30%), parents (13.40%) etc.

(XIX) One fifth of the schools indicated that they are experienced problems in tackling the education of the CWSN. The nature of problems are : repeated teaching, behavioural problems of the students, regular maintenance of the group hearing system, lack of appropriate hearing aids and common syllabus.technical back-up for maintaining the group hearing system, Provision of appropriate hearing aids and support of psychiatrist for solving the behavioral problems.

(XX) All the schools have received whole hearted support and cooperation from the parents and are willing to enroll their CWSN without any reservation. The schools are organizing awareness programmes to the parents once (66.67%) and twice (33.33%) in a month and it is found that majority of the parents are attending such meetings without fail.

Recommendations

(A) The students desires to have electronic teaching, practical teaching, project method, playing and singing, lecture method, teaching through lip and hand moment, teaching through live examples, using audio-visual aids, i-pads, over head projector, tape recorders, audio tapes, playing cards, etc., This clearly indicates that the students requires innovative teaching rather than the normal monotonous teaching. Hence, the administrators should take effective steps to train the teachers in different teaching methods so as to enable them to adopt suitable teaching methods based on the level of the comprehensiveness of the students.

(B) The institutions should take initiative to depute the teachers for in-service training programmes or sanctioning paid leave in case of government schools and by providing additional support to the NGOs running the schools.

(C) It is suggested that all the schools meant for the inclusive education should be equipped with all physical, academic and recreational facilities and should possess the barrier free environment so as to retain the CWSN at the schools.

(D) Additional facilities required for class rooms such as walking sticks, group hearing aids, musical classes, computer classes, physiotherapy, special chairs and tables, audio-video tapes, hearing aids, tri-cycles, i-pads, gym and yoga centre, carroms, group learning, CWSN friendly toilets, u-shaped tables, arm chairs, speech therapy, Braille watch, swing etc., need to be provided to the schools.

(E) The normal children could not adjust with the CWSN mainly due to their superiority complex, low performance of the CWSN in sports and games, competitive activities, dance and singing competitions etc., Hence, there is a need to take measures to promote awareness and adjustability among all the students through cooperation, coordination, recognizing the potentialities of the CWSN, helping them to overcome their inferiority, counselling and convincing the children to overcome the bias. The head teachers, teachers and parents should be oriented in this regard to promote harmony among them.

(F) All the schools should be provided with physiotherapy personnel.

(G) The Home Based Teachers should be monitored effectively from time to time so as to fulfill the very objective for which they have been recruited.

(H) The community, especially the parents should be created awareness about the physiotherapy facility provided for their wards by the Government in the schools so as to make use them effectively.

(I) The RBCs should also be monitored effectively from time to time and the courses taught by them need to be monitored so as to percolate its impact on the enrollments of the CWSN in the schools.

(J) As per the records, still about 20 percent of the CWSN school aged children are out of the schools. Hence, measures need to be taken to enroll all the school aged children without considering their caste, creed, disability etc.

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