

Evolving Role of Special Schools for Children with Visual Impairment in India

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Abstract

Schools are the place where children and adolescents spend a significant time of their young lives. Student well-being is essentially influenced by the school. Special schools are believed to be an institute specifically dedicated to improving the lives of children and adolescents with disabilities; schools for the visually impaired are one of the forms of special schools. In India special schools for the visually impaired have significantly grown in number after independence. The nature of these schools varies as there are several innovative models of special education being practiced across the country. In the context of the recent development like the Right of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, and Amendment 2012, one needs to look at special schools and inclusive schools as a dichotomous continuum for education of all children with disabilities, exercising their right to appropriate education. Special schools will continue to have a significant role to play for inclusion of children with visual impairment. This paper explores the role and importance of special schools for the children with blindness and low vision in the country in the present context.

INTRODUCTION

A recent report on disability by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reveals prevalence of 2.2%

persons with disability in India. Further, 18.8% of the total population of persons with disabilities include visually disabled (United Nations 2016, p. 148). Presently, more than

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5 million people in India are visually disabled (Census of India 2011; United Nations 2016, p. 148). Amongst all other countries of the world, India has the largest number of blind people (Sinha 2007). This paper explores the role and importance of special schools for the blind in the country in the present context.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) enforces to provide free and compulsory education for all children of the nation (Government of India 2009). Amendments in this act in year 2012 stress upon inclusion of children with visual impairment (low vision and blindness) along with other disabilities as included in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 and the National Trust Act, 2000 (Government of India 2012, Government of India 1996, Government of India 2000). Inclusion is not about placing all children with special educational needs in mainstream schools (MacBeath et al. 2002, p. 11). Special schools are also a part of inclusion plan (Linton 2015, p. 12). Providing option for home-based education for children with severe disabilities was also added in the amendment in 2012 (Government of India 2012). Section 31(1) of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, equip every child with benchmark disability between the age of 6–18 years to have the right to free education in a neighbourhood inclusive school, or in a special school, of his or her choice” (Government of India 2016, p. 13). On

the neighbourhood criteria, the Delhi High Court ordered that a student’s educational fate cannot be relegated to only his or her position on a map, whereas they have a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution to be considered for admission in a school of their choice (Jain 2017, Government of India 2015).

School is an important place in the context of learning, development and success in life. It is a place where children and adolescents spend a significant time of their young lives (World Health Organisation 2007, p. 7). A student’s well-being is essential for both academic and social development (Australian Government 2016). Schools optimise this by providing supportive and respectful learning environments. Schools also act as an agent to share these responsibilities with the whole community. Prevalence of children with disabilities is 1.5% among 59 years age group and 1.8% among 1019 year (United Nations 2016, p. 148). The Eighth All India Education Survey reveals an increase of 17.36% in students with visual impairment in the country (NCERT 2016, p. 38). The education of children with visual disabilities needs an obvious attention. Vision is the primary learning modality and source of information for most children (TSBVI 1995). Students with visual impairments have unique educational needs. In order to meet their unique needs, students must be

provided special services (AFB 2000). Their educational needs are fulfilled by the two systems of school services: a) special schools; and b) schools with inclusive setting.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS: WIDER PERSPECTIVES

Special schools for persons with disabilities are institutes dedicated to improving the lives of children and adolescents with disabilities. Most special schools are specifically designed, staffed and resourced to provide the appropriate special education for children with additional needs. Special schools also focus on providing individualised education, and addressing specific needs of students. A special school could be defined as a school for children who have some kind of serious physical or mental problem (Collins 2016). It is a school for children who are unable to benefit from ordinary schooling because they have learning or physical disabilities (Collins 2016). Generally, students attending special schools do not attend any classes in mainstream schools (Heward 2014). *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2016) also defines special school as a school for children who have physical difficulties or problems with learning.

Schools for the blind or visually impaired are one of the category of special schools. These special schools mainly cater the educational needs of children with visual impairment. Special schools for children with

visually impaired in India usually offers residential facilities. Tuttle (1986) confirms special residential schools as the most comprehensive and the most expensive delivery model (as cited in Brown, Baine and Neufeldt 1996, p. 185). These centres focus on almost all arenas of the children with visual impairment including social, vocational and personal care strategies. We can also say by general public opinion that special schools denote a residential school. Frampton and Kerney (1953) defines residential school for the visually impaired as a boarding school offering education and care to blind children from ages 3–21, or from pre-school through the high school. Educationally speaking, these schools attempt to provide complete education and care for the blind children. These services include medical, academic, musical, social, vocational courses, placement, and follow-up (as cited in Punani and Rawal 2000, p. 240). The entire campus of the residential school is designed, equipped and staffed specifically to meet the needs of the visually impaired children. In addition to the classroom teachers, there may be other specialists in physical education, orientation and mobility, activities of daily living, music, craft teaching, occupational therapy, career counselling, vocational counselling, social work and psychology. The educational materials, educational and mobility devices and specialised equipment are accessible to all the students throughout the campus.

However, the residential school for the blind has undergone a decisive change in character.

Special schools are no longer an institution which children enter with an expectation that they will remain there until graduation, returning to the regular world only for vacation. Rather, it is a part of the stream into which it channels the pupils who have adjusted, and from which it receives those who need special training or temporary adjustment (Punani and Rawal 2000, p. 240). The residential special school system was never intended to separate, isolate or stigmatise visually impaired students from the society (Farrell 2007). Frampton and Kerney (1953) emphasise that the residential school has outlasted many social, educational, and economic changes and survives today, rigorous and alert, to its task. It will remain an important setting for fostering inclusion in the future by insuring the most productive and practical method of teaching. Mainstream schools are simply unprepared to educate children with blindness or severe visual disabilities and were found to be somewhat ignorant about their potential (Farrell 2007).

SPECIAL SCHOOLS: EMERGING ROLES

The presence of special schools in a parallel stream does effect the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools (NCERT 2006). Allan and Brown (2001) revealed that students' account of their special

school experience appear to suggest a much broader notion of inclusion (p. 206). The students' experiences were characterised by achievements, progress and independence, rather than isolation and oppression. Special schools need to be brought into the inclusion debate. Since the children are taught by a specialist having expertise on specific impairments, their needs may sometimes be understood better. In special schools children grow up with their disability peers and develop a common culture. Special school remains a viable option, if a child with disability is not getting the required resource support in the mainstream school (Julka 2005). Semmel et al. (1991) concluded after surveying elementary school teachers (from both general and special schools), that they were not supportive of placing special students in mainstream schools (as cited in Wang 2009).

The recent debates about the inclusion of children with special needs have mainly focused on mainstream schools. Special schools have often been ignored, whereas the debates on inclusion must take account of the contributions of special schools (Allan and Brown 2001). It is not helpful to think these two systems in terms of a dichotomy. Whereas both of the services are essential for the continuum of individual educational need among all pupils (Beveridge 1999). Special schools continue to have a significant role to play (Beveridge 1999). Recognising

that the regular classroom may not be suitable for every disabled student, the options on this continuum include instruction in special schools (AFB 2000). A special school provides services that address the full range of the blind or visually impaired student's disability-specific needs, including those arising from other additional disabilities (AFB 2000). The special schools can play an active role in giving resource support for the mainstream schools by providing specialised services. The roles of special schools is to emphasise the need for planned interaction between special and mainstream schools (Beveridge 1999).

SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND INCLUSION

The historical context outlines that there has been a springing up of special schools over time along with provisions for integrated education (Julka 2005). Special schools were started as a separate system of education for children with visual disabilities, when the first special school for the blind was established in 1887 at Amritsar by Miss Annie Sharp (Punani and Rawal 2000, Julka 2005). These special schools are generally organised according to different disability specific categories.

There has not only been an increase in numbers or figures, but special schools have also evolved with new roles. Models of disability are a useful framework in which to gain an understanding of disability issues, and also of the perspective

held by those creating and applying the models. These models provide an insight into the attitudes, conceptions and prejudices of society and give an idea of the current trends being developed for people with disability. Special schools started in initial years were based on 'charity approach'. Whereas, presently special schools are working on 'rights-based approach', disability has been understood differently. Formal education of visually impaired started with residential special schools and their importance has been still proved by various researches and policies. This requires looking into the students' lives beyond the locus of the school, finding ways of equipping them as responsible and independent learners and perhaps becoming less preoccupied with the physical location of where (special or inclusive) provision is made (Allan and Brown 2001, p. 206).

The purpose of special school provision has lacked clarity in government policies in the past. However, several policies including the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, promoted the setting up of special schools in the government and private sector for those in need of special education (Government of India 1996). Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, also stressed over equipping "the special schools for children with disabilities with vocational training facilities" (Government of India 1996). There is also confusion about the extent to which vocational, functional

and life skills should be a part of the curriculum in such schools (Sebba, Thurlow and Goertz 2000, p. 114). Responsible agencies saw a continuing role for special schools and intended to adopt a 'practical, not dogmatic' approach to inclusion (Dyson and Millward 2000, p. 176). Programme of Action, 1992 already stressed the importance of special schools when recommended integrated education. It suggested special schools as a system to make students ready for general schools (MHRD 1992, p. 117). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) also has a provision to support special schools. Alternative roles for special schools were endorsed by the Salamanca Statement (1994). Hence, special schools in their new found identity would become a far more flexible resource, by working in partnership with and creating a response to special needs.

SRI-IMRB survey 2014, reported that the out of school children among the disabled population is much higher (SRI-IMRB 2014). Disaggregation reveals that a higher percentage of out of school children are in the rural areas (UNICEF 2014). Despite the fact that majority of India's total population lives in rural areas, facilities of special schools are more in urban areas. Hence, the role of special schools needs to be redefined in the Indian context. Special and general education, in other words, needs to move a significant step closer together. At no place this survey refers to children

with Disabilities studying in special schools. This raises a serious concern about the right to education of these children and the way the provisions of the Right to Education 2009 are being monitored (Mukhopadhyay 2016). This also raise a question, will these special schools be considered as schools as per Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. Special schools need to be seen as a continuum of education and not as a welfare initiative (Mukhopadhyay 2017).

SPECIAL SCHOOLS FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN INDIA

The onset of the twentieth century in India witnessed the emergence of avoluntary sector providing rehabilitation services for the disabled population (Narasimhan and Mukherjee 1986). From 1887 to 2017 many organisations have evolved to offer school education services to students with visual impairment. Offering services do not mean that the organisation is a well-equipped school. So, operational definitions for different level of special schools are the need of the hour.

A comprehensive directory of special school services is needed for practitioners, special educators, teachers and parents. As parents are usually not much aware of the services and location of special schools, therefore, it becomes more meaningful for them. There is a lack of comprehensive source of information for parents of children

with disabilities in India (Planning Commission 2002). Poor parental awareness has also been reported by special schools' authorities regarding services that need to be provided to their visually impaired ward.

In 1947, India had a total of 32 schools for the blind (NCERT 2006). Narasimhan and Mukherjee (1986) reported total 126 special schools for the visually impaired out of the total 516 special schools across the country (p. 124). In 1989, the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, Dehradun (NIVH) conducted a project on collecting data from schools for the blind or visually impaired across the country and shaping them to form a directory. Total 190 special schools for the visually

impaired students were reported by this directory (NIVH 1989). In 2005, total 205 special schools for the blind and visually impaired were reported by a research study (Kain 2011). Special schools for the blind were also listed by Institute of the Physically Handicapped, New Delhi and Webel Mediatronics (Webel Mediatronics, n.d.). The number of institutions offering school services for the students with visual impairment rose to around 435 in 2016 as reported by the online directory (NIVH 2016). The online directory also reported a total of 1,061 organisations offering services for the blind and visually impaired across the country (NIVH 2016). The detailed state-wise numbers of schools are as given below in Table 1.

Table 1
State-wise number of blind schools in India from various sources

S.No.	State	1986	1989	2005	2015
	Source ®	Narasimhan and Mukherjee	NIVH Directory	Kain, 2011	NIVH Online Directory
1.	Andhra Pradesh	8	12	12	15
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	-	*	-	00
3.	Assam	3	*	-	06
4.	Bihar	2	12	12	07
5.	Chhattisgarh	#	#	06	09
6.	Goa	##	*	-	01
7.	Gujarat	17	20	22	45
8.	Haryana	4	04	04	05
9.	Himachal Pradesh	-	01	01	02
10.	Jammu and Kashmir	-	02	01	02
11.	Jharkhand	#	#	05	05

12.	Karnataka	12	07	07	09
13.	Kerala	10	11	10	13
14.	Madhya Pradesh	02	18	12	37
15.	Maharashtra	22	29	29	65
16.	Manipur	01	01	01	05
17.	Meghalaya	-	*	-	02
18.	Mizoram	01	01	01	03
19.	Nagaland	01	01	01	00
20.	Odisha	02	08	10	43
21.	Punjab	01	06	06	16
22.	Rajasthan	06	06	07	21
23.	Sikkim	-	*	-	00
24.	Tamil Nadu	10	20	22	29
25.	Telangana	#	#	#	#
26.	Tripura	-	01	01	02
27.	Uttar Pradesh	05	12	08	35
28.	Uttarakhand	#	#	04	04
29.	West Bengal	07	10	11	31
30.	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	-	*	-	00
31.	Chandigarh	01	01	01	03
32.	Dadra and Nagar Haveli	-	*	-	00
33.	Daman and Diu	-	*	-	00
34.	Delhi	11	06	08	19
35.	Lakshadweep	-	*	-	00
36.	Pondicherry	-	01	01	01
	TOTAL	126	190	205	435

#State was not in existence at the time of data collection

*Data not available

It is evident from Table 1 that the number of special schools has increased in the country even after a strong move by the government to integrate them in mainstream

schools by various schemes. The increase in special schools has also stressed establishment of norms and standards as well extensive database of these schools; which is lacking

presently. Special schools must adhere to all policy requirements and legislation. All national and provincial requirements also apply to special schools unless otherwise indicated (Republic of South Africa 2007, p. 5). Norms or indicators on quality parameters of special schools may enhance the functionality and services across the country. Database or directory of school or services for the visually impaired helps every stakeholder attached with the education of children with visually impaired. The concerned department of education must keep comprehensive records of all special schools (Republic of South Africa 2007, p. 5). A good directory must have presentation of data in different formats. The evolution in communication technologies replaces the paper-based directory. Instead an online directory is more helpful for accessing data related to schools and also sorting in desired formats at certain extent. For the same it is necessary or desirable that data has been captured with certain principle of making better directory. It is also a pre-requisite for the directory that terms should be well defined operationally to avoid any vagueness. The difference in resource centre

and special schools also need to be defined in policy documents.

CONCLUSION

As per the present scenario, special schools show themselves as a crucial factor for all round development of the children with visual impairment. However, there are some disadvantages like children usually have to leave their families and communities to stay in a residential setting because these schools are usually not available in their immediate environment. Due to staying away for long in a separate environment, away from their families, they may find it hard to readjust to their families, peers and communities. But, now special schools have evolved as a new right-based setting for education and developing life skills, instead of merely being an institution for charity. These schools must be seen as integral part of inclusive education.

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