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Ensuring Equitable and Inclusive School Education: Analytical Review of Primary Stakeholders

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Abstract

Education is the single greatest tool to achieve social justice and equality in society (NEP, 2020, p. 23). School education being a primordial tool at the forefront in this regard, plays a critical role. It is worth noting that in the context of India, efforts to ensure equitable and inclusive school education is an ongoing endeavour. It was the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, followed by the Right of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act of 2016, that added much-needed impetus towards this obligation of ensuring equitable and inclusive education. However, a closer observation at the implementation level reveals loopholes that need to be addressed. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 renewed commitment has added the much-needed fillip towards addressing these hitherto existing lacunas in our education system.

This article contends that despite a luminous and well-scripted policy documents, ensuring an inclusive and equitable education is still far-fetched without the active participation and collaboration amongst the primary stakeholders—parents, teachers, school heads, peers, etc. The current study based on secondary sources is the result of the analysis and argument drawn via literature reviews. The study establishes that a concerted effort by the stakeholders is critical to bridge the existing gaps in our education system pertaining to equitable and inclusive education. Furthermore, the cooperation and empathy of the stakeholders towards all sections of society will determine how many defects could be reduced or eliminated paving the way for achieving equitable and inclusive education.

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INTRODUCTION

With inclusive education, there is a need for a shift in attitude, availability and accessibility of infrastructure, pedagogy, need-based instructional methods, materials and the means of delivery, assessment and evaluation, and the much evident issue of acceptance at all levels in the education system (Ahmad, 2015, p.15). The NEP 2020 emphasises the need to provide all students, irrespective of their place of residence, with a quality education system, with a particular focus on historically marginalised, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups. Its proposal to take initiatives to ensure that all students from such groups, despite inherent obstacles are provided with various targeted opportunities to enter and excel in the educational system (p.4), invariably entails that education must percolate to every section of the society to ensure an equitable and inclusive education.

In that respect, it was the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) that brought a landmark shift towards the education of those children with special needs. The framework emphasises that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. India, being a signatory to the Salamanca Statement, is required to give the assurance that disability and diversity are addressed within an

inclusive educational domain (Forlin, 2013, p. 67). The Indian Education Commission (1964–66) was the first statutory body to suggest that the education of handicapped children be recognised (Yogi, 2021). Subsequently, several national initiatives were also undertaken afterwards. Some of the initiatives that followed suit were Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC, 1974), the National Policy on Education (1986, 1992), the District Primary Education Programme (1994), the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD, 1995), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2004) and RTE (2009), and the latest one being Right of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) 2016, etc. Hence, to put this to practice the onus rests not just on the level of policies and acts, but the active involvement of the primary stakeholders becomes paramount.

With this understanding, the article focuses on the role of stakeholders in enabling inclusive and equitable education, with specific emphasis on school-going children with disabilities and challenges. The study uses secondary sources and literature reviews as the basis for analysis to draw a logical conclusion. The study contends that without the active participation and cooperation of the major stakeholders at the grassroot level, no amount of legislation or policy will be able to address the existing lacunas relating to inclusive and equitable education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Equity in Education

The Cambridge dictionary defines equity as ‘the situation in which everyone is treated fairly and equally’. Sen (2009) defines equity as fairness, impartiality, and justice, and relates it to equal opportunity. It means that every child living in the society must have an equal opportunity to learn the skills of reading, writing, and simple arithmetic. Furthermore, inclusive education ensures that every child has the right to get a quality education in nearby schools in an environment that is friendly, safe, and secure. Here, diversity is acknowledged and measures are taken to remove any barriers to encourage participation (Kaushik & Srivastava, 2019). Hence, equity denotes a welcoming environment where everyone is valued, respected, and treated equally despite personal differences. Each student feels empowered, appreciated, and respected when educational practices are inclusive and based on equality and fairness.

Master and Adams (2018) exposed the challenges pertaining to the needs of the students as their needs are not uniform. This is because some students have special needs that require additional adult support, special school facilities and additional funding to meet those needs. This is where the role of primary stakeholders

becomes critical. Parents, teachers and peers must learn to accommodate and extend necessary assistance to such students. Since equitable and inclusive education for all remains a constant challenge, so, it is fair that resources are distributed unequally to meet these special needs and to ameliorate the disadvantages faced by students in the society. The proposal of NEP 2020 the establish gender inclusion fund to ensure that all girls receive equitable and quality education, and the setting up of Special Education Zones (SEZs) to provide targeted support to those disadvantage group is welcome step.

Inclusive Education

Canada often is regarded as a leading nation in the area of inclusive education and disability. Andreas Hinz of Germany argued, “Canada has made inclusion a hallmark of its educational systems” (Bunch, 2015). The principle was later adopted at ‘World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality’ at Salamanca Spain in 1994, and was restated at the World Education Forum at Dakar Senegal in 2000 (cited in Nagpal, 2018, p.801). The concept of inclusion emerged from the idea of providing equal opportunities to all children keeping in mind the diverse nature of their individual needs (Swarup, 2007, p. 197). But the concept of equal opportunities is profoundly

challenging since it embodies the notion of egalitarianism—the idea that everyone ought to receive education as a right and not merely by chance or charity (Salam, 2020).

Today, the conceptual evolution of inclusion in education has moved beyond the bounds of disability and has now extended to all children in and out-of-school. It includes ‘culturally responsive’ education and pedagogy based on learning experiences sensitive to the cultural realities of the child—home life, community experiences, language background, and belief systems (UNESCO, 2004). To meet the various learning requirements, an inclusive education strategy calls for reorganising school and learning environment policies, curricula, cultures, and practices (Patton, 2011). With this strategy and approach, the school will then be able to meet the requirements of the students rather than forcing them to change (Mamidi, 2017).

The term “inclusion” emphasises society’s need to alter the environment so that Children with Disabilities (CwD) and those with Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) feel empowered to participate in the educational system (Kaushik and Srivastava, 2019). Inclusive education suggests that all learners—those with and without disabilities—can study alongside one another by

having access to common pre-school facilities, schools with the support of the necessary infrastructure and services (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007). Furthermore, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 (NCFTE) emphasised inclusive education as philosophical as well as an arrangement of institutional facilities and processes.

Hence, a closer evaluation of the two definitions reveal that the two terms are almost symmetrical in their definition and approach. However, while equity has to do with laws and government arrangements, inclusion, on the other hand, has to do more with institutional arrangements. It endorses the role of government and social institutions to be accommodative and allow space for non-discrimination, irrespective of the differences and background of the individual. Table 1 shows the dropout rate on the basis of social categories. Over the years 2017–2019, it is evident that the dropout rate of those belonging to socially disadvantaged groups of SCs and STs is higher than the other groups. It is also evident that dropout rate of ST boys and girls continues to be high. Therefore, to achieve an inclusive education there ought to be considerable attention given to these groups while not losing focus on other categories of social and physical indicators.

Table 1
Dropout Rate at Different Levels, 2018–19* (All-India)

Social Category	Primary Level, 2018–19			2017–18
	Girls	Boys	Overall	
General	3.62	3.61	3.62	1.92
Scheduled Castes	4.90	5.41	5.16	4.86
Scheduled Tribes	5.23	5.71	5.48	3.65
Other Backward Class	4.18	4.55	4.37	3.76
Overall	4.30	4.60	4.45	3.51
Social Category	Upper Primary Level, 2018–19			2017–18
	Girls	Boys	Overall	
General	2.78	2.27	2.51	2.87
Scheduled Castes	6.48	5.62	6.04	6.69
Scheduled Tribes	6.46	6.89	6.69	6.06
Other Backward Class	5.60	4.22	4.89	5.35
Overall	5.14	4.26	4.68	5.02
Social Category	Secondary Level, 2018–19			2017–18
	Girls	Boys	Overall	
General	13.02	13.37	13.2	14.95
Scheduled Castes	18.95	21.3	20.18	21.79
Scheduled Tribes	23.25	26.26	24.8	22.27
Other Backward Class	17.34	19.22	18.34	19.58
Overall	17.01	18.64	17.87	18.96

Source: U-DISE+ portal. * It is for cohort 2017–18 Cited in: Mehta (2021)

ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR MANDATE

A stakeholder is either an individual or a group of persons having an interest in an enterprise that requires their support to be successful. Extrapolating the concept to the field of education, the stake is the education provided in schools and institutions of higher learning, and the stakeholders are teachers, parents, children, community members, educational

administrators, non-academic staff, and so on, because they all have an interest in the educational process and the enterprise of education cannot be successful without their support (Kaushik, 2019).

A proactive approach is required from the stakeholders both at the planning and execution stages to address the learning needs of students with special needs as equal participants in the learning

process. To implement need-based educational strategies effectively, it is important for all the stakeholders involved to collaborate, participate, and be better equipped with the necessary skills to help the learners learn the skills appropriate for their roles and capacities in order to help them perform well in education and life (Ahmad, 2015). Hence, the primary stakeholders must be identified, as well as their roles minutely understood. Since the educational process cannot be addressed in isolation, the study considers the collaborative roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders in addressing the challenges that arise as a result of children's diverse needs. Accordingly, the focus of this study will be on the implementing agencies such as schools, teachers, parents, siblings, peers, etc., and their roles critically analysed.

Schools

Schools are regarded as the unit incharge of putting educational policies into action. When schools in India are asked to open their doors to children with special needs, they feel pressed and burdened. Attitudinal

and infrastructural barriers become an additional burden. The policies' intentions and their implementation on the ground are not in sync. As a result, the school administration has a lot of tasks in hand to achieve the desired level of inclusiveness and equity.

A study by Gupta (2019) reveals the need for teachers to consider every aspect of learners' cognitive, mental and physical needs in an inclusive classroom. Apart from the curricular adaptations, the need to modify infrastructures in the school is also emphasised. Physical infrastructure must facilitate a conducive environment for those physically challenged. Integration of inclusive schools with regular schools entails that every school must be physically prepared to accommodate any children with special needs for a wholesome inclusive learning. Even though the majority of our schools, as shown in Table 2, have building amenities, a sizable portion of them do not have ramps and other facilities within the school premises. With only 62.1 per cent of ramps, schools must do much more to eliminate infrastructural obstacles to move closer to inclusive goals.

Table 2
Facility Indicators 2017-18 (All India)

Facilities	Total	Facilities	Total
Building	98.24	Ramp	62.12
Boundary Wall	56.15	Physics Laboratory	39.49
Separate Room for HM/ Principal	55.53	Chemistry Laboratory	39.22
Electricity connection	63.14	Biology Laboratory	37.46
Library	77.38	Computer Laboratory	45.17

Librarian	6.72	Mathematics Laboratory	15.47
Playground	62.17	Language Laboratory	9.79
Computer	29.57	Geography Laboratory	15.24
Functional Computer	13.07	Home Science Laboratory	9.03
Internet Connection	13.61	Psychology Laboratory	4.48
Drinking Water Facility (Functional)	90.1	Integrated Science Lab	47.8

Source: U-DISE 2017–18, NIEPA, New Delhi

Teachers

Teachers are the primary actors in the educational process. The teacher is responsible for ensuring curriculum transactions, conducting assessments and evaluations, creating an accepting and democratic environment, and learning (Kaushik, 2019). Providing support to students with disabilities so that their inclusion in education will be socially and academically meaningful is a practical challenge faced by the teachers in inclusive programs. The teacher sets the stage right and conducive for meaningful learning. In essence, it is the teachers who are authors and creates an inclusive ambiance in the classroom and school.

Further, the curriculum that is alien to them must be evaluated and adequate changes must be introduced at the earliest as this leads to the feeling of alienation in the child, and could have a detrimental consequence as it demolishes the sole purpose of inclusion and equity in the classrooms. Meaningful inclusion cannot be accomplished by special education teachers alone. It requires the collective effort of the administrators, teachers, and

parents to not just value diversity, but also question the traditional ways of segregating difficult students (Swarup, 2007). Adaptability of the teachers to conform to the restructured curriculum and pedagogical practices as recommended by NEP 2020 to create an inclusive classroom where varied cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic background of the students are respected and cherished will help transform and foster inclusion in the classrooms.

In addition, peer-support and peer interaction must be valued and encouraged in the classroom by the teacher to engineer the spirit of equity and inclusion in the school (Kaushik, 2019). It is, therefore, incumbent upon the teachers to ensure that a conducive environment in the school is enabled where everyone accepts and internalise diversity as a positive strength in the learning process.

Parents

Parents occupy a critical place among the primary stakeholders in education whose active involvement is vital to ensure that children perform well and realise their potential. The role of the family or parents in this case is so

critical that, the UN Convention on the 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities' advocated the role of the family as an initial participant in providing the conducive environment for children suffering from disabilities. This initial environment helps Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in realising their true potential and living a fulfilling life (Kaushik, 2019). Hence, the education of the parents in this regard is crucial and must not be overlooked. Parents must provide the necessary resources and emotional support their children, and must advocate for inclusive practices and policies. They must demonstrate inclusive behaviour and attitude at home while at a same time teach values of respect and acceptance to sow seed of inclusive mindset (NEP, 2020).

In addition, parents must accept the situation at hand and provide essential information to the teachers to help them facilitate the child with the right guidance and assistance. Having a fair amount of knowledge regarding the child's conditions is critical for teachers to help them decide their approach towards the child with special needs. Meanwhile, parents of children without special needs must also support inclusion by accepting and appreciating their children's participation in a diverse classroom and encourage them to become friends with children with special needs (ibid, p.157). However, despite emphasis given at the level of policies, absence of such

collaborations is still observed in our schools, and the case is acute in the far-flung rural schools. The parents in such areas do not even send their childrens with special needs to schools as they do not want to burden the school, or that parents are utterly ignorant otherwise.

Siblings

Family is the first environment that a child encounters in the process of socialisation, and siblings learn from each other through lifelong relationships. In case one of them is born disabled or has special needs, the other gets impacted. The siblings without disability, if involved properly, with full awareness and knowledge, may prove to be beneficial in making their brother or sister with disability effectively included in the school or society (Kaushik, 2019). The traditional concept of hopelessness and disdain for education due to challenges faced by the SEDGs and families of CWSN must not be allowed to affect the ample possibility of turning the status-quo of the child and the family.

Siblings must take the moral responsibility of encouraging the less fortunate in the family to look ahead in life with hope and render assistance wherever required. Taking the support of the available resources and support system, siblings can become a great motivating factor. This attitudinal shift of the siblings towards the child that requires extra attention will pave the way for inclusiveness in the classroom or school. NEP 2020 also

recognised the critical role of siblings and advocates the need to offer emotional and academic support to its other, to help will confidence and self-esteem by encouraging their siblings with special needs to participate in school activities. Siblings, therefore have the moral obligation in sowing the seed of inclusion and equity right from the start. The spill over effect of this positivity beyond the family will eventually transform our approach towards those with special needs.

Peers

In classroom teaching, maximum interaction occurs among the students which may not be teacher-directed. These interactions are often informal and outside the purview of the teacher's active gaze. This helps the children bond with each other and aids in the formation of a social identity and a kind of social solidarity that allows for a creation of a conducive environment in which the child with special needs feels accepted and acknowledged. It is in this kind of situation that the peers must aid and perform inclusive and equitable roles towards their fellow peers. NEP 2020 also emphasised the need for peers to create a school culture that values diversity and inclusivity by treating all classmates with respect and kindness, and to eliminate biases and stereotypes within the school environment.

Peers must be strictly informed that no child must abuse or make fun of CWSN or children belonging to the SEDGs that leads to the exclusion and

the feeling of alienation from the other children. This will allow the creation of an environment conducive to mutual acceptance and respect, thereby facilitating a proper foundation for an inclusive society. Interaction among peers must be carried out without hurting anyone's feelings and sentiments. Communication and social etiquettes must be enhanced to interact with positivity and respect for the feelings of CWSN and children belonging to SEDGs. Peer mentoring programme where students assist those who need extra help to foster a sense of community and belonging must be encouraged (NEP, 2020). The challenges lies in navigating such culture when our education system still celebrates competition, and is achievement oriented.

CONCLUSION

While inclusive and equitable education is an essential goal in its own right, it is a huge challenge to achieve a society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, thrive, and contribute to the nation (NEP, 2020). Although the Government of India has attempted to create numerous policies that are inclusive for people with disabilities since the country's independence in 1947, their efforts have not borne the desired results, nor has it achieved its goal of "Education for all" uniformly across the country (Nagpal, 2018, p. 804). However, having understood the term equity and inclusiveness, as well as the associated barriers of our educational system in general and

school education in particular, we can now set a firm footing to address the core challenges that thwarts us from achieving our goals.

Today, there is an even greater need to emphasise the teamwork of all stakeholders. This has emerged from a thorough examination of our educational system available through relevant literature and research. The process from the time the policies are drafted to the time they are implemented at the grassroots has revealed a huge gap that needs to be bridged. All of the stakeholders we have extensively discussed must collaborate and work together for this

massive exercise to succeed. All roles and responsibilities must be seriously considered, followed through with almost sincerity, and done with a feeling of duty and empathy. Merely depending on the efficacy of laws and policies will have the reverse effect of what is intended. The plan to address the issues must be novel and relevant as requirements and demands diversify. The gaps that have so far existed at the implementation level to ensure inclusion and equity will be bridged when the true intentions of the implementing agencies and the appropriate cooperation of the stakeholders are in sync.

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