

School Social Worker's Role in Promoting Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

An inclusive environment provides more opportunities, where all stakeholders (parents, teachers, peer groups, community, and administration) are responsible for overall development, while the special education structure lacks exposure to inclusive relationships and learning. The Indian constitution included clauses that safeguarded the rights of both people with and without disabilities. There are numerous laws and regulations, Mental Health Act of 1987, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, the National Trust Act of 1999, the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016 (RPWD 2016), and National Education Policy 2020, all offer guidelines for education, welfare and protect the rights of children with disabilities. Recently, NEP 2020 has placed a strong emphasis on inclusive education in all schools, and for those who face educational obstacles, an outside expert (school social worker/counsellor) should be accessible for advocacy and counselling. A school social worker with expertise in intervention techniques and strategies to deal with the issues is of great help in the bigger picture. Despite numerous laws and regulations for inclusive education, there are still many obstacles in its implementation. There are chances for improvement, and school social workers can provide essential services to reduce the hurdles of children with disabilities in receiving inclusive education. This paper highlights the role and importance that school social work practices play in advancing inclusive education.

Keywords: Special Education, NPE, School Social Workers, Community, New Millenium

INTRODUCTION

Every human is entitled to the same opportunities for survival, livelihood, education, and employment. Education opens up new ways of interacting with others. In India, ratified laws are primarily intended to address educational deprivation. Numerous constitutional protections, including Articles 15, 16, 17, 21A, and 38, are geared toward this goal (Saini, 2015). There has been a noticeable increase in the number of children who are not attending school, and some children who were previously denied access to formal education have been placed in special or mainstream schools (Rose et al., 2021).

The Indian government has taken a number of actions to protect children with disabilities. Following lengthy consultations with educators, students, and policymakers, the Indian government unveiled the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in response to these persistent issues (Ashok Kumar et al., 2024). Inclusionary education and related provisions are currently covered in the National Education Policy 2020, chapter 6 (Bhatt, 2023). Significant problems are still plaguing the Indian educational system despite these policy initiatives. These include huge differences in academic outcomes between various socio-economic groups, lack of teachers, and inadequate infrastructure (Ashok Kumar et al., 2024; Kingdon, 2007). Since significant laws have been passed, there has been increased attention paid to the elements that can help or hinder efforts to integrate students who have previously been excluded from school (Rose et al., 2021; Jha et al., 2013; Sarao, 2016). The Indian government has taken several actions to address these inequalities, even though the majority of the responsibility for education rests with the various state governments. NEP 2020 places a strong emphasis on inclusivity, which emphasizes fair access to education for everyone, especially underprivileged and marginalized groups. The policy recommends establishing Gender-Inclusive Funds and Special Education Zones to address disparities and ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive high quality instruction (Ashok Kumar et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Particular focus is placed on the education of children from socio-

economically disadvantaged backgrounds, gender equality, and children with disabilities (**Ashok Kumar et al., 2024; Government of India, 2020**).

Brief Overview of Inclusive Education in India

Before independence, there were some initiatives regarding formal special education. For example, special institutions for the vision-impaired and hearing-impaired persons, opened in 1880s, and 1930s, respectively (**Mishra, 2000**). The fact that special education is not available to all children and adults is one of its main drawbacks. It isolates them from society, and thus creates feelings of inferiority in both parents and children. Children with disabilities who live in remote areas or come from low-income families are unable to attend special educational institutions. The NEP 1986 mandated that all children, including those with disabilities, must attend mainstream schools between the ages of 6 and 14. The idea of inclusive education gained more attraction in 1994 when it was presented at the UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs in Salamanca, Spain. Every child has distinct traits, interests, skills, and learning requirements. Children with special needs should have regular access to assessments that incorporate child-centered pedagogy that can address their needs. To enhance the implementation of special education and fortify the rights of individuals with disabilities, the Indian government enacted the Mental Health Act of 1987, the Rehabilitation Council of India Act of 1992, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, the National Trust Act of 1999, and the Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act of 1999 (**Antony, 2013**). The status of people with disabilities is strengthened by these laws, which also offer protection from disparities.

Recently, the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016 (RPWD 2016) was expanded to include more disabilities and reservations in welfare programs, services, education, and other areas. The Kothari Commission's 1964 report on a ubiquitous school system for children from all different backgrounds led to the formation of India's first National Education Policy, or NPE, in 1968 (**Gohain, 2024; Bhatta, 2014**). To prepare them (children with disabilities) for normal growth and to give them the courage and confidence to face life, the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 recommends that the children with special need should be integrated into the general community at all levels as equal partners (**Ahmad, 2015; Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2002**).

In 1987, UNICEF and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) collaborated to launch Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (P.I.E.D.), India's first integrated education pilot project. The enrollment of children with mild disabilities and those with severe disabilities increased significantly under PIED. Following PIED's success, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1997 established Integrated Education for Disabled (IED), which uses a composite approach involving special and general schools (**Ahmad, 2015**). To meet the needs of students with disabilities, the Rehabilitation Council of India Act of 1992 created a professional training programme. Children with disabilities were subject to special and inclusive school admission regulations under the Persons with Disability Act of 1995 (**Barwal & Bala, 2019**). The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities was released in 2006 to create a culture where the public, private, and governmental sectors support equality and a dignified life (**Makwana, 2002**).

According to Mukhopadhyaya & Mani (2002) and Ahmad (2014), the education policies focus on regular classroom, infrastructure, discipline, traditional teaching methods, and syllabus cover rather than flexible curriculum, uses of ICT (Information Communication Technology), learning by playing, and pedagogy. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) 2001 was India's main tool for achieving the universal primary education goal of the Millennium Development Goals 2000s. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Education For All (EFA) movement, became a nationwide initiative after the EFA conference in Dakar in 2000 (**Bakshi, 2017**). "Inclusion" in schools was legally supported later in 2009 by the Right to Education Act (RTE). (**Rangarajan et al., 2023; Bhan & Rodricks, 2012**) Every Indian child between the ages of 6 and 14 is entitled to a free, first-rate elementary education in their community under the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE). (**Parliament of India, 2009; Gale et al, 2022**). As part of this, children with disabilities were given 25% of the seats in each classroom (**Gale et al., 2022; Chaturvedi & Kuldeep, 2015**). In the context of inclusive education, this study focuses on outlining the difficulties and the expected role of school social workers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A descriptive study about the disability status of all family members was carried out with 1294 households by **Bakshi et al. in 2017**. All family members become demotivated as a result of limitations and functioning issues brought on by a health issue. The results demonstrated that vulnerable children, particularly those with disabilities, leave school early and do not complete high school than children without disabilities. **Mkahwana's (2017)** study adds to our understanding of the value of inclusive education in the classroom. The goal of universal education is achieved through such inclusive education.

When inhibitions and boundaries are removed, the education standard improves. Integration of children with disabilities into the educational structure is a difficult undertaking that necessitates a great deal of community involvement and mobilization. **Bhattacharjee and Rumki (2021)** conducted research in India on inclusive and special education. The researcher examined the challenges that special needs students face concerning the availability of assistive technology, specialized teachers, barrier-free learning environments in the school, and the attitudes of teachers, staff, students, and families toward students with special needs.

Additionally, it concluded that special education needs could not be addressed separately and that, to fulfill the goal of "education for all," it is essential to ensure that all students receive top-notch instruction regardless of their physical, mental, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. **(Aliasa and Salleh, 2017)** examined 32 articles about special education teachers, children with severe disabilities, or children with multiple disabilities.

Among students with special needs, absenteeism and disciplinary issues are frequently widespread problems. Numerous issues have been identified in articles about the challenges special education teachers face when teaching multiple disabilities, including curriculum incompatibility, a paucity of specialized training or courses, low self-efficacy, a scarcity of specialized teaching aids, poor mobility skills, an unfavorable classroom environment, and an absence of sensitivity on the part of mainstream teachers and school administrators.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is analytical and is predicated on secondary data collected from a variety of reviews, articles, and research papers. The researcher searched electronic databases, including online literature, to perform a thorough literature review.

Objectives Of Study

- To study inclusive education and the difficulties associated with its application.
- To assess the function of school social workers in inclusive education.

Difficulties With Effective Inclusive Education Implementation

The adoption of inclusive education stems from the recognition that society suffers when children with disabilities and those without disabilities receive separate education **(Barwal & Bala, 2019)**.

1. Low Economic Status

Since special education is to be special in the strict sense of the word, private and funded schools were so expensive and out of reach for all children with disabilities, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. NPE policy in 1986 placed a strong emphasis on inclusive education. In government schools, inclusive education is a better way to combat the low economic status.

2. Insufficient Resources

Learning activities and learning by doing are facilitated by resourceful environments; however, inclusive schools

lack study materials, active learning activities, indoor games, outdoor games for children with disabilities, and handicrafts.

3. Training of Teachers

Although general teachers are proficient in their particular fields, they lack knowledge of sign language, braille, and other specialized methods for working with special needs children. All teachers in their schools, blocks, and districts receive training from special educators to deal with and identify the problems of children with special needs, but these brief courses are not very beneficial to teachers. The varied needs of students with disabilities are frequently not adequately met by teachers in mainstream schools due to a dearth of expertise.

4. Lack of Skilled Teachers

Special education teachers were known as “Resource Teachers” under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and under the integrated programme, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan 2018, called them “Special Educators” (**Johansson et al., 2023**). Every inclusive school ought to have qualified special educators on staff, but due to a lack of funding and appropriate scheduling, schools and children with a range of needs struggle when there are no permanent, qualified special educators available.

5. Resource and Infrastructure Limitations

The biggest obstacles to implementing inclusive education are inadequate infrastructure and resources, which are particularly problematic in remote areas. Although urban areas have better facilities, implementation is hampered by a lack of funding, a tight budget, inadequate administration, and community involvement. High-quality assistive technology and accessible structures for play and walking are essential for special needs children.

6. Practices of Inclusivity in Regular Schools

When discussing inclusive practices in mainstream education, it depicts a scenario in which teachers and students from a variety of backgrounds are expected to treat each other fairly. However, the size of the classes in mainstream schools makes it extremely difficult to provide individualized attention. Constraints on inclusive practices in mainstream schools are caused by inadequate support mechanisms.

7. Limited Accessibility

Home-based education is beneficial for people with severe and profound disabilities, but it can also be a barrier and limit accessibility in remote areas with limited transportation and assistive technology. Additionally, people from low-income backgrounds may prefer home-based education.

8. Discrimination and Stigma in The Society

Despite the RPWD Act of 2016 special provisions and strong laws against disability-based discrimination, public institutions still practice invisible segregation, and some parents' disabilities are stigmatized and shunned by their children. The integration of special education students into regular classrooms is hampered by these attitudes, segregation, and institutionalization.

9. Absenteeism and Dropouts

Lack of resources, specialized faculty, parents' awareness and poverty, accessibility, and self motivation are some of the components in increasing the high dropout rate among children with disabilities. Absenteeism rises when parents are not involved in their children's education.

Possibilities For Enhancement

1. Reinforcing the Lawmaking System

As was already mentioned, there are several laws, policies, programs, and acts aimed at enhancing the living status of persons with disabilities. NEP 2020 recently placed a strong emphasis on upholding the current legal system. However, stringent provisions for implementation at the grassroots level and accountability systems are required for observable results.

2. Building up Resources and Infrastructure

The bare minimum of infrastructure upgrades and inclusive school operations are currently available in all existing old schools, even those without specific modifications. The cost of specialized schools makes them unaffordable. To improve the quality of inclusive education, there should be specialized teachers, accessible physical spaces, and assistive technology available. Every government school system should have public-private partnerships, and working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can help close resource gaps, particularly in underserved areas.

3. Programmes for Inclusive Teacher Training

Special educators are underrepresented in school settings, and general teachers handle children with special needs without any specialized training. Accelerating the inclusive teacher training program, there is a need for special educators in every school and also general training programmes are facilitated in schools on a continuous basis.

4. Fostering Cooperation and Awareness

The government and schools are not solely responsible for inclusive education; everyone (parents, community, and resource persons) must work together to achieve this goal, which is essential for promoting acceptance and changing society. Promoting inclusive education requires awareness and cooperation from stakeholders, legislators, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations.

5. Raise parental participation and awareness

Parents of differently abled children must provide them with more encouragement and support. Parents need to be made more aware of the causes of disabilities, safety measures, treatment, and the value of education in particular life, through newspapers, programmes, and the accomplishments of children with disabilities/Persons with Disabilities.

The Function of School Social Workers

Intending to change the educational landscape of the nation, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents a critical turning point in India's educational system (**Ashok Kumar et al., 2024**). Accordingly, inclusion in education refers to methods that enhance all students who are susceptible to exclusionary pressures' engagement with local school curricula, cultures, and communities (**Ainscow et al., 2006; Gale et al., 2021**). **Bhatt (2023)** asserts that social workers have numerous chances to improve the environment in inclusive education and school complexes.

School social workers, during their coursework, pursued many skills, methods, and intervention strategies in field work, group work, community work, and institutional work. Differently abled children face isolation, deprivation, and numerous problems in house, school, and community levels. School social workers can use social work methods to provide services to differently abled children regarding their advocacy, counselling, protecting their rights, and education. In the case work method, school socialworkers can help in decision making related to educational goals, advocacy for admission in appropriate schools, medical assistance, and make bridges between physiologists, psychologists, and therapists. (**Rangrajan et al., 2023**). In the group work

method, school social workers develop a feeling of self-help group and can increase interaction between groups that have similar problems related to education, therapy, medical assistance, and referral services. Through sharing, common interest, problems, interaction during meetings, and empathy of members bring changes about behaviour, and cognition level (Wu, 2017). In the group work method, parents get support and coping mechanisms to handle the situations with differently-abled children, after meeting with other parents who suffer similar problems (Wu, 2017). At the community level, common problems faced by differently abled children are societal perception about disability and stigmatizing it with bad karma, curse on life, and sometimes treating children like that, and converting it into discrimination in social events. School social workers can use external approaches to create awareness of differently abled individuals have equal rights to get an education, enjoy events and outdoor activities, sports, walk freely, and make their own decisions. Community resources are skillful and important in the development of children's growth, so school social workers with intervention skills can increase the contribution of the community to the growth of differently abled children.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though India has made strides toward creating a legal framework for special education, there are still issues in converting these provisions into practical application. A more inclusive and equitable educational system can be achieved by addressing these issues through inclusive practices, improved policies, and strategic resource allocation. School social workers can use outside strategies and their foundational knowledge to intervene at the school, family, group, and community levels. Parental, community, and school support, as well as advocacy and coordination, are essential for students with disabilities. School social workers serve as a liaison between parents, educators, and policies.

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