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INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN INDIA

Sujata Bhan^{a*}

^a *Department of Special Education, SNDT Women's University, Juhu campus, Mumbai 400049, India*



Abstract

The Right to Education (RTE) Act is anchored in the belief that availability of equal educational opportunities to children belonging to different social and economic background will reinforce the idea of equality enshrined in our constitution, and ensure that children are not discriminated on the basis of social or economic background or any such criteria. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is Government of India's flagship programme under RTE Act for achieving the universalization of elementary education. Since its launch in 2001, SSA has infused substantial new resources into India's elementary education. But current schools are not delivering what is expected of them. Many NGOs initiated training and empowering students with visual impairment (VI) along with Government initiatives through SSA in Gulbarga in the state of Karnataka in India. A retrospective research was conducted in Gulbarga to find out the status of inclusive education of primary, middle and high school students with VI. The research included 12 students randomly selected from different schools: 6 were from Gulbarga Taluka where IEFs (integrated education facilitators) were providing support to VI students studying in IE schools, and 6 from Sedam Taluka where only SSA IERTs (integrated education resource teachers) were providing support to the IE schools with VI students. A qualitative approach was adopted and students with VI, their class teachers, resource teachers, principals, parents, siblings, and grandparents were interviewed. This research presents the current status of inclusive education in India with a focus on children with visual impairment in Gulbarga. The research findings highlighted an urgent and imperative need for making structural changes in the policies for implementing inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusion, visual impairment, integrated education, integrated education resource teacher, integrated education facilitator

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bhansujata@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

There were an estimated eight million 6 to 14 year-olds in India out-of school in 2009. The world cannot reach its goal to have every child complete primary school by 2015 without India. In 2010, India implemented the Right to Education Act (RTE), to legally support inclusive education. Inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued (Lindsay, 2007).

Inclusive schools put the values of pluralism, tolerance, and equality into action; they ask teachers to provide appropriate individualized supports and services to all students without the stigmatization that comes with separation. Research shows that most students learn and perform better when exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum, as long as the appropriate strategies and accommodations are in place. At no time does inclusion require the classroom curriculum, or the academic expectations, to be watered down. On the contrary, inclusion enhances learning for students, both with and without special needs. Students learn, and use their learning differently; the goal is to provide all students with the instruction they need to succeed as learners and achieve high standards, alongside their friends (Nevada partnership for Inclusive Education, n.d.)

Today, 18 crore children are taught by almost 57 lakh teachers in more than 12 lakh primary and upper primary schools across the country (UNICEF India: Education, n.d.). This notable spatial spread and physical access has, however, not been supported by satisfactory curricular interventions, including teaching learning materials, training designs, assessment systems, classroom practices, and suitable infrastructure (The Situation of Elementary Education in India, n.d.). Simply placing students with special needs in the regular classroom is not enough to impact learning. Teachers in inclusive schools are asked to vary their teaching styles to meet the diverse learning styles of a diverse population of students. Only then can the individual needs of all our students be met. Schools of the future need to ensure that each student receives the individual attention, accommodations, and supports that will result in meaningful learning.

SSA a partnership between the central, state, and local governments has to ensure that all children (focus on special groups namely girl child and the disabled) are in school, complete and satisfactory primary education is provided, all gender and social category gaps are bridged and universal retention is achieved by 2013. To achieve these objectives support is sought from teachers, community, NGOs, and women organizations. Strategies central to SSA programme are institutional reforms, sustainable financing, community

ownership, institutional capacity building, and improving mainstream educational administration, community based monitoring (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, n.d.).

The present research was conducted in Gulbarga in the state of Karnataka. The Government of Karnataka identified nine talukas in Gulbarga district as the most backward talukas. The main sources of livelihood for the population of this area are agriculture, medium & small scale industries. Most of the population is from low socio economic strata with primary level of education or no education at all. A local NGO initiated training and empowering students with visual impairment (VI) along with Government initiatives through SSA.

2. Problem Statement

The research was carried out to understand the current status of inclusive education in India with a focus on children with visual impairment in Gulbarga in the state of Karnataka.

3. Purpose of the Study

1. What is the status of inclusive education of primary, middle and high school students with visual impairment in the state of Karnataka?
2. Do the students get any support from the school, or Government or local NGOs to enable their full participation in the integrated education (IE) school?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present research was conducted in Gulbarga in the state of Karnataka. In Gulbarga Taluka IEFs (integrated education facilitators) were providing support to VI students studying in IE schools, and in Sedam Taluka only SSA IERTs (integrated education resource teachers) were providing support to the IE schools with VI students.

5. Research Methods

The present study was a retrospective research. A qualitative approach was adopted. Interviews were conducted in order to understand experiences of students with VI as well as their class teachers, resource teachers, principals, parents, siblings, and grandparents. Interview schedules used were unstructured and open ended which allowed the respondents

explain their points of view without getting tied down within set boundaries. Content analysis technique was used to analyse the responses.

The research was carried out in Gulbarga district in the state of Karnataka. The areas covered were Gulbarga and Taluka Sedam. The population in this area which were amongst the most vulnerable were the population of PWDs (persons with disability) belonging to reserved category who all suffered from socio-economic backwardness as well as illiteracy. They engaged in daily labour and education was not given the importance that it deserves. Even the sighted children in the area were not going to education in a big way.

The number of students covered by SSA Integrated Education Resource Teacher (IERT) was 1:125 and number of students covered by Integrated Education Facilitator (IEF) was 1: 10-12.

For the present study 12 students were randomly selected from different schools: 6 were from Gulbarga Taluka where IEF were providing support to VI students studying in IE schools, and 6 from Sedam Taluka where only SSA IERT were providing support to the IE schools with VI students. Informed consent was taken from the school principals, parents, and students as well.

6. Findings

Following factors emerged from the study that were affecting students in integrated education programmes:

6.1. School factor

In terms of enrolment of students with VI in IE schools, it was noted that enrolment rate has gone high. This may be because of physical availability of schools within close areas of residence and free education. As some IE schools provide scholarship, free uniforms and mid-day meals many parents are keen to enrol their children in these schools. Special schools are located far and many parents are not even aware of their existence. When some schools especially private schools, do not accept students with special needs, admitting students with VI seems to be encouraging enrolment for students with VI. This affirmative action seems to be possible due to school policy, and willingness of the school management to implement government policy of education for all.

Interviews also revealed that the students are promoted to next class even if their performance in exam is not sufficient to pass them. Grade progression policy for students with disabilities may decrease the likelihood of dropping out of students. But it raises a

question to be answered. Mere physical presence in IE school does not guarantee participation in learning (Croft, 2010). If students with VI are able to cope with the system at primary level and perform well, they will not have problem when they move to higher grades. However, it would be much more difficult for under-achieving students with VI at primary level to “catch up” with study in high secondary school where students would not be able to gain enough attention from teachers.

6.2. Coordination between resource teacher and class teacher

As most of the students in this project studied in the same school from the beginning of their education there did not seem to be any issues in their transition from one class to another. In schools with NGO intervention the same resource teacher was monitoring the basic education of students with VI and was sharing information with the class teacher. This could contribute to smooth transition from primary class to middle school. However, if students with VI had to go to a different school in different place, they might have had problems because class teachers would not know their needs or how to cater for them. This was evident when many class teachers were interviewed in schools where SSA appointed IERTs rarely met the students with VI and nor shared any information regarding VI with the class teacher.

6.3. Availability of resources

The lack of resources, both in human and in material sense, for students with VI in IE schools could hinder learning in schools. Although some students get some help from their peers in reading textbook, the government does not provide large print textbooks for students with VI.

Lack of teaching materials, lack of classrooms and the large class size would also challenge students with VI to participate in learning. Teachers often manage 40 to 60 students in one classroom and make 2 to 3 grades sit together due to shortage of teachers and classrooms. Such a situation is likely to make it difficult to pay particular attention to individual students. Resource teachers, whose one of the works is in-class support teaching, are not able to support every single class for each student, since they have to take care of a lot of students in different schools. IEFs reported that they provided braille kits to the students with VI but many IERTs were not providing that facility also. Many LV children were learning braille when they could be trained in using large print.

IEFs were providing the required support to the students with VI. But in case of non-intervention schools, the students with VI did not seem to be benefiting from IE placement.

6.4. Classroom transaction

Teacher plays a very important in inclusive education. Literature has suggested that teacher's interactions with students in classrooms could impact on student's learning (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003). Although all class teachers were aware of VI student's special needs, students, in practice, have not experienced any teaching specially designed for them. Most students were made to sit in front. Besides making this physical arrangement no other special techniques of teaching were followed in class. When the teachers were interviewed they admitted their lack of knowledge and skills required to manage such children. Underestimation of the potential of a VI student or apathy towards these students could also be a reason for poor teaching.

Some teachers were interacting with the IEFs and they showed more patience and willingness to help these students.

6.5. Peer Support

Peers understanding and support appear to be critical for students with VI to participate in school, as children put a high value on peer relationships (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). Most students revealed on being interviewed that they loved their school because of their friends. Peers helped the students with VI in mobility, in academics and also in sports and other co-curricular activities.

Some students did mention that she/he had been bullied by their peers. That could be due to lack of sensitization of the sighted peers about students with disabilities. But mostly it was found that peers accept students with VI without any prejudices and IE placement bridges the gap between the sighted and the visually impaired.

6.6. Non-School Factors

6.6.1. Attitudes of Parents

Attitudes of parents towards education have been identified as an important factor in terms of student's enrolment (Pryor & Ampiah, 2003) particularly for students with VI (Mania, 2010) and adaptation to the next level of education (Sanders, White, Burge, Sharp, Eames, McEune, & Grayson, 2005). In rural India it is important to advocate the importance

of education to parents since families are often not willing to send their children with disabilities to schools due to social stigma attached to disabilities.

In addition to social stigma, parents often see children with disabilities as financial burden and consider that these children should not receive education beyond primary level (Obeng, 2007). Most of the parents said that unless government supports the education of their children, they may not continue their education. Girl child has a double disadvantage in India. One she is a girl and second she is VI. Parents want the girls to be well versed in household chores and education is secondary. Due to lack of awareness some parents have unrealistic expectations from their children while some want to go to any extent to help their child but do not know how. IEFs have been contributing to raising awareness among parents and community. This seems to have played a vital role in gaining support from parents. These efforts, to some extent, can make disability friendly environment among parents and community, which could enhance enrolment and participation in school.

6.6.2. Poverty

Most of the students in this research came from poor family background. Many were motivated to come to school because they were getting food there. According to Maslow one will not have the need to learn if his basic need for food is not fulfilled. Some students were keen on taking a job just to supplement their poor family income. The concern here is that right now children are enrolling in IE programs because of the financial support from the government. Will they drop out once the support is stopped as they may not have the finance for further studies? Because of poverty parents may also not encourage them to pursue higher education.

6.6.3. Student Factor

Student's own motivation, his personality, his own aspirations play a significant role in his education. Many students wanted to be a teacher. They were interested in pursuing higher studies if they received the necessary support from family and teachers. Some students were not very sure of studying further as they were aware of the financial condition of their family. They were more eager to contribute to the family in economic ways. The unconditional love and family support seemed to form the basic foundation for all students with VI which gave them the strength and courage to face the challenges imposed by VI.

7. Conclusions

This research was conducted in two areas; Sedam taluka and Gulbarga taluka of Gulbarga district in the state of Karnataka in India. IE schools in Gulbarga taluka which were given the addition support by NGO in the form of IEFs, the students with VI were actually benefiting and participating in their learning. In Sedam taluka on the contrary in IE schools where there was no support coming from IERTs, the student with VI was merely physically integrated. It would not be wrong to say that such IE placement is meaningless and these children would rather be placed in special schools to get their educational needs met. Additional and continued support for the VI student is most essential if IE schools are to be the best placement for these students.

The shortage of trained resource teachers is one challenge which needs to be addressed. As one IERT is expected to manage so many students they are not able to do justice to any one student. All teachers should be trained in pedagogy of teaching children and also trained in necessary skills to address the unique needs of VI student in their class. They should coordinate with IEFs more and follow up the work of IEFs in class in their absence. For IE program to succeed, the students with VI should not be just physically included in schools but should be participating in true learning. A well-coordinated team effort will go a long way in successful education of a VI student.

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