

A Study on Implementation of Inclusive Education at the Elementary Level in the selected North-Eastern States

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The north-east India, the eastern most region of the country, is connected with the mainland through a narrow corridor squeezed between Nepal and Bangladesh. It comprises eight states and the location of the region is strategically important as it has international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Tibet. The present system of education in the north east India started in the early years of the nineteenth century with the coming of the Christian missionaries who came as traders. According to the 2011 census, the total literacy rate in the region stands at 68.5 per cent.

Education is the most potent tool for socio-economic mobility and a key instrument for building an equitable and just society. Elementary education provides the foundation for development of education at higher stages. Hence, elementary education needs to be strengthened. The Constitution of India guarantees eight years of elementary education to each and every child in the country. Elementary schooling consists of five years of primary schooling and three years of upper primary schooling. The Government of India has launched a number of programmes for spreading elementary education in India, including the DPEP of 1994 and the new programme launched by the government with regard to improvement of elementary education is SSA in 2001. The programme was launched with an aim to ensure entry, retention and education of children between 6–14 years of age. Inclusive education is an integral component of SSA which promised to make ‘education for all’ by 2010. Many policies and Acts have been legislated to make inclusive education a reality. New policies

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have been launched to overcome limitations of previous efforts such as the *Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD)* and the *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2006* which stressed on modifying the existing infrastructure facilities, teaching procedures in order to make it more children friendly.

Inclusive Education (IE) refers to providing quality education to children with special needs (CWSN) in mainstream schools. This was clarified in the Salamanca Statement and Framework Action (1994), which is a landmark for IE. This statement provides directive for reorganisation of all school activities to facilitate learning of CWSNs in mainstream schools. As per the statement, inclusive schools must reorganise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rate of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricular, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resources and partnership with their community. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in school. Keeping this in view systematic changes are required in general education system to meet special educational needs arising out of limitations in learning of each child.

In India integration was a major reform of the 1970s, the need for IE become evident from the fact that despite complete financial support under the IEDC scheme for integrating learners with special needs into the educational system, only 2–3 per cent of the total population of these learners are actually integrated into the regular schools. Dissatisfaction with progress towards integration, the costs involved and the advantages of an inclusive environment in bringing about increased acceptance of learners with Special education needs (SEN), led to the demands for a more comprehensive and drastic change which will benefit all children especially CWSN. IE emphasises not only education of students with disability but a process through which all students including those with disabilities are educated together in regular mainstream schools, with specially designed, appropriate and adequate support in their neighbourhood schools. Hence the goal of IE is to prepare all students, irrespective of academic level or ability, disability, caste, culture, religion, language or ethnic group meet the challenges and requirements to participate as equal partner in the society and to contribute to the development and improvement of the community.

The objectives of the present study was to identify and study the different components available in the schools for providing quality education for CWSN such as teachers training, curricular/ instructional adaptations, teaching learning process, teaching learning materials, evaluation system. It also examined the implementation of IE and attempted to find out if the children with disability were really benefitting from it or not. The population for the present study was all the Inclusive Elementary Schools from the three North Eastern States, that is Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. A sample of 30 Elementary Schools, which provided inclusive education, was selected, that is 10 from each state of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. The sample also included State Authority, teachers, and parents. The tools used for data collection included questionnaire, observation schedule, and interview schedule for the heads of the schools, teachers, CWSNs, children without special needs, parents, state educational authority. The data collected were analysed using qualitative technique.

The major findings and observations of the present study are described briefly. The study indicates that majority of the schools has proper building for the children. Looking at the accessibility for children with disability, the study indicated that majority of the schools has ramps and ramps with handrails, whereas 23.33 per cent schools do not have these facilities. Further, when looking at the availability of toilets, 36.66 per cent schools have toilets which are common for all children, 56.66 per cent of the schools have separate toilets for boys and girls with no toilet facility for disabled children but only 6.66 per cent schools have the facility for a separate toilet for the children using wheel chair. It was found that majority of the schools (76.66 per cent) were using the traditional bench-desk and chair-table as seating arrangement for the students and only 3.33 per cent of the schools have a special seating arrangement for the children with disability. These shows that necessary facilities for the CWSN are not properly provided which might lead to less enrolment and retention of CWSN in mainstream schools. When it comes to the basic requirements like drinking water of children, it was found that nearly 46.66 per cent of the schools have no provision for drinking water and 53.33 per cent have the facilities. Also in the study it was found that only 3.33 per cent of the schools have library and computer facilities. As regards electricity, the study shows that 56.66 per cent have electricity connection and 43.33 per cent do not have the facility.

The unavailability of proper aids and appliances may hamper the performance and progress of children with disability(s). From the present study it was also found that 43.33 per cent schools have adequate playground, 20 per cent have inadequate facilities and 36.66 per cent do not have playground at all.

Looking at the academic qualifications of teachers, it was found that majority of the teachers (43.66 per cent) were twelfth passed and 5.63 per cent teachers were post graduates. Out of 71 teachers, only 42.25 per cent of the teachers have professional qualification or degree such as D. El Ed, JBT, BTC, B. Ed (general and Special), NTS and D.Ed which is an essential criteria for teaching at the different level. From these trained teachers only 10 per cent has B.Ed in special education. From the study it is clear that majority of the teachers do not possess the professional qualification or any training in inclusive education required to teach at the elementary level and CWSNs. This study found that inclusive education could be successfully implemented if the level of teacher's competency increased and this can be done if proper training and courses are being given to them which will boost their confidence. When it comes to teachers receiving training programmes in inclusive, it was found that only 11.26 per cent of the teachers were trained in different kind of training programmes. Another challenge faced by the teachers was in assessment. Due to lack of training and knowledge proper and modified assessment could not be done properly or individual attention could not be given to these children. What was more challenging for the teachers was shortage of teachers and there were schools under study which were still multi-grade school. About 60 per cent of the teachers voiced that they had to perform other non-teaching duties as well and hence there's not much time for preparation for inclusive teaching. Again, majority of the teachers expressed that they are not qualified to teach CWSNs and hence there is a need for special teachers to handle CWSNs. Another factor which posed as a challenge for the teachers was lack of interest and cooperation from the parents of CWSNs which acted as a hurdle for the teachers in dealing with these children.

This study also examined Principal's perception on inclusion of CWSNs in the mainstream schools. Majority of the principals felt that general education should be modified to meet the needs of all students, including CWSNs and were of the opinion that general education teachers can help the CWSN to succeed but this can

be done only when teachers are given proper training. However, looking at the requirements and facilities required Principals were less certain, but still favoured policy that mandates that the CWSN be integrated into the general education programme. The data collected from the State Education Authority indicated that the states have identified children with special needs and majority of them were enrolled in different schools. However the data further indicated that there were no teachers trained in this area. In order to assist CWSNs, resource teachers were engaged at the district level but not appointed for each school. This can hamper or slow down the teaching learning of both teachers and CWSNs. As per the information given, the resource teachers have to prepare IEP and assessment procedures for each child as per need. When it comes to curriculum adaptation it was found that the states have not yet adapted the curriculum but adaptation is being done by the resource teachers themselves in the classroom as per need.

The study shows that resource teachers and teachers are responsible for preparing TLM for CWSNs. Capacity building or training of teachers is one of the most important aspects for a successful and effective implementation of inclusive education. Results show that the state do provide training in the area of inclusive education but for a very short duration of even one day. This indicates the seriousness towards implementation of inclusive education. Evaluation is also one of the areas which require adaptation as per needs of the children. The data collected point that evaluation was being done by resource teacher for CWSNs at regular interval and adapted as per need. Though it was reported that teachers were being trained in inclusive education, in the field it was found that teachers lack training and skills in effective implementation of inclusive education. It was also seen that most of the schools and teachers do not use TLMs due to unavailability of TLMs. Again it was observed that curriculum has not been adapted in proper manner and teachers still used the traditional approach to teaching for all children. Assessment and evaluation of CWSNs was also being done in the same way without modification for all children. There is an urgent need to engage proper management and monitoring agency/committee to see the requirements and needs of CWSNs and that they benefit from it.

Results show that there is still a long way to go for making schools a place where all children irrespective of ability or disability participate, learn and benefit from education provided to them.

Further, we can say that inclusive education is possible if there are appropriate support system provided to all concerns such as required infrastructure and facilities, funding for schools, providing trainings for teachers in the area of IE and aids and appliances and also curriculum adaptations for children. It is increasingly realised that inclusive education is indispensable for the society to progress. It is based on the principle of fundamental rights. However, one has to overcome the barriers that hamper inclusion. As already mentioned earlier that the study concentrates on those schools which are inclusive schools, hence the present study is of vital importance for the States, principals, teachers, students and parents as well of all inclusive schools. The findings of the present study may be utilised in different ways.