

Inclusion of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) and School Leadership: A Review

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Abstract

Globally, a school entails diversity and is not situated within one kind of uniform structure of society. Diversity in schools could be due to differences in class, gender, socio-economic strata, race, disability, caste, region, language, ethnicity, and so on. At national and international levels both, the robust call for school reform led to their all governments to focus efforts on inclusive education. Children with special needs (CWSN) are no exception to exercising their right to avail themselves of educational provisions as per their individual needs. The focus of diversity in this paper, for inclusion in the school context, is CWSN. The school head as the vital stakeholder in the teaching=learning process has to constantly find pathways to meet these challenges daily in the school set up especially in post Covid-19 times. The paper reviews the interface of school leadership and inclusion of CWSN.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity has many shades of advantages for some people and disadvantages for some people, and could be vice-versa as per its nature in a particular social context. Diversity exists due to many reasons, it may be due to differences in caste,

class, gender, socio-economic status, physical and mental well-being, race, language, habitation, and so on. Here we would delimit our focus of diversity arising on account of special needs due to different physical, mental, and both kinds of challenges in the school setup. The common terms

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used for people who face such kinds of challenges are termed as children with special needs (CWSN). They are sometimes also referred to as disabled or handicapped children. The paper is an attempt to study and understand how different elements of leadership influence educational provisions for the inclusion of children with special needs (CWSN).

India has been a signatory to various international educational reforms for equality and justice for providing optimum educational environments to all learners without practising any discrimination. With the enactment of various acts and schemes by our government, in particular, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, the education of CWSN in mainstream schools has been slowly inclined towards their inclusion. The route to inclusive education has opened up pathways for catering to the diverse needs of learners. The need for inclusive education emerged more as a consequence of catering to the diverse needs of learners. When we talk about school, the stakeholder who in the most pivotal position is the school head or any the individual accountable and responsible, by initiation or voluntarism, to accomplish various tasks in the school. The school head as the vital stakeholder in the teaching-learning process, has to constantly find pathways to meet these challenges daily in the school setup. To give quality education to the diverse

groups of learners, we need to adopt inclusive practices in schools. The underlying philosophy of inclusion is getting transformed by enhancing the capacities of each stakeholder. In providing equal opportunities to all learners irrespective of any kind of discrimination or disadvantage.

To on sure this we need to aim for a whole school approach for school improvement which is the overarching goal of inclusive education. To achieve this, the school heads play a pivotal role in transforming the school bring to be able to mainstream CWSN in the main stream fruitfully.

The everyday tasks may look similar for special needs children but the challenges to accomplish the tasks continue to increase with greater intensity due to the varying needs of special children. On the contrary, if pursued with consistent commitment, it is possible for the school leader to achieve these tasks in a gradual fashion. There are many factors responsible for successful inclusion and different leadership roles play important role at different points of time. In the present paper, various aspects of school leadership influencing the successful inclusion of CWSN, have been discussed.

THE SCHOOL REFORM AGENDA

Globally there has been a transition from mere school improvement to systemic reforms of Schools. In this context, Harris and Chrispeels (2008), as cited in Chapman, et al. (2011), have highlighted 'a shift in

the school improvement initiatives from an individual level to national or state-level impact'. Hopkins (2011), as cited in Chapman, et al. (2011), described the five phases of school and system improvement and the last phase was that of systemic improvement. A review of international school improvement experiences as noted by Datnow, et al. (2006), as cited in Chapman, et al. (2011), stated that there are two most important aspects for school reforms. The first aspect was to move from individual to national level approach. The second aspect was that we could learn about systemic change only by studying systems, their constituents, and the interactions among these constituents. The shift from school to systemic reform would lead to a change in the perspective of school leadership.

India, in its efforts to move towards school reforms and achieve the goal of inclusive education, has made consistent efforts to initiate the policies and programmes to bring about change at the systemic level to benefit all children with the aim of providing better educational opportunities nearest to their homes. Thus, we have many government legislations, of which the recent and significant once are the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act, 2009) which gives every child the right to set admission in a neighbourhood school, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, (RPwD Act, 2016) dignifying CWSN

for all rights which are rendered to others. The latest Government of India policy— for the education sector, National Education Policy, 2020 in coherence with the internationally accepted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has explained socioeconomic disadvantage in terms of 'gender identities (particularly female and transgender individuals), socio-cultural identities (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and minorities), geographical identities (such as students from villages, small towns, and aspirational districts), disabilities (including learning disabilities), and socio-economic conditions (such as migrant communities, low income households, children in vulnerable situations, victims of or children of victims of trafficking, orphans including child beggars in urban areas, and the urban poor)'. The Policy further 'recognises the importance of creating enabling mechanisms for providing Children With Special Needs (CWSN) or *Divyang*, the same opportunities of obtaining quality education as any other child'.

Ainscow, et al. (2006) as cited in Florian (2013), wrote that 'inclusion is essentially about attempts to embody particular values in particular contexts as people build up their view of inclusion, related to their experience and values. This is done when they work out what policies and practices they wish to promote or discourage'. They called this approach 'school improvement with attitude'. Inclusive

education can be realised with concerted efforts to improve schools. 'Cultural change is directed towards a transformative view of inclusion, in which diversity is seen as making a positive contribution to the creation of responsive educational settings' (Ainscow, et al. 2006, as cited in Ainscow and Sandill, 2010).

The advocates of inclusive education have proposed Universal Design of Learning (UDL), in which a flexible learning environment is created through curricular materials, pedagogic strategies, and other resources that offer alternatives considering the unique needs of each child in an inclusive classroom. However, there is a dearth of studies on what school leaders should do to enable inclusive education but Sujatha (2011) observed that most of the past research has school effectiveness and highlighted the major characteristics of successful schools.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Let me not dwell more on the theories or models of leadership, but on how these have been conceptualised. There are a variety of ways in which the term 'leadership' has been explained in the educational context. Hemphill and Coons, 1957 (as cited in Miller, 2016) defined leadership as 'the behavior of an individual when he is directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal'. Several research studies have been conducted in the past to understand school

leadership in the Indian context. Mythili (2015) portrayed school leader as 'a person who leads school change by transforming oneself and working effortlessly with all stakeholders while navigating through the hierarchical system by understanding one's functional position within the larger system; innovating methods to create collaboration to achieve the goals by bringing about a shift in attitudes, knowledge, skills and beliefs; who converts pressure into opportunities; who responds to crisis and accepts limitations; negotiates between paradoxes of certainty and commitment and conservation and change.' The 'process of leading change in school is called school leadership'. Chugh, (2016) described in her article on review of research in school leadership as the 'process of identifying, tapping and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, pupils and parents toward achieving common education purpose.' Her study focussed on different themes researched under school leadership in the Indian context, namely—, Role of Head Teachers in School Management, School-based Management, and Leadership; Knowledge Creation; Teachers' Perception on School leaders; Professional Preparation of School Leaders; Leadership Behaviour; Leadership and Job Satisfaction. Subitha (2016) explained that 'school leadership had been in the shadows of educational administration and management until now but is slowly

emerging out of its confines to establish itself as one of the de facto forces behind school improvement.’ Mythili (2017) added in tune with this fact and wrote ‘there was no distinction between the role of a school head and that of other teachers till secondary school stage in India and only in senior secondary schools, principals are seen to be spending more time on management, administration, staff management, finances, etc.’ Saravanabhavan, et al. (2016) noted that ‘empirical studies on school principals and their impact on student outcomes are limited in India’. There are a handful of researches on school leadership considering the Indian context. A few to mention are by Diwan (1996) who investigated the leadership styles of school principals in their specific school situations and in another work, Diwan (2000) highlighted that the leadership behaviour of school heads play an important role in determining successful school management.

Leadership roles and characteristics are quite similar in all kinds of organisations. Marzano, et al., 2005 (as cited in Miller, 2016), delineated the following characteristics of school leadership:

- School mission and goals
- Climate of a school and individual classrooms
- Attitudes of teachers
- Classroom practices of teachers
- How a curriculum is organised

- Opportunities created for students to learn
- Development and capacity-building among staff

Miller (2016) proposed that ‘an effective principal is thought to be a necessary prerequisite for an effective school’. Mythili (2015), in her review study on school leadership, found that leadership is critical for quality student learning. According to Chaudhary, 2002 (as cited in Mythili, 2015), ‘It has become a faith that the capacity of schools to improve teaching and learning is strongly mediated by the quality of leadership by the head teachers.’

WHO ARE CWSN?

The issue of education of CWSN has been highlighted both at national and international forums all across the world. Miller (2016) has pointed out that all the countries have tried to bring about changes to the deficit and associated practices through the enactment of laws and policies for children with special educational needs. Therefore, children with special needs (CWSN) have been labelled, named, and categorised in numerous ways like handicapped, disabled, impaired, differently-abled, physically challenged, mentally challenged, dumb, moron, and so on. The term most commonly used in government documents and otherwise is children with special needs (CWSN), as used in this paper in tune with the terminology used in the latest government legislature,

the RPwD Act, 2016. There are 21 categories of disabilities listed and defined in the RPwD Act, 2016 which have been used in this paper.

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

In India, the education of handicapped children has been emphasised since the Kothari Commission report in 1964–66 at the government level. This issue has been more actively delineated in major government documents as in the National Policy on Education 1986, the Rehabilitation Council of India Act (RCI Act) 1992, the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD Act) 1995, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) 2009 and recently the RPwD Act, 2016. Our government has also been a signatory to several international efforts at Salamanca, 1995; World Education Forum, Dakar, 2000 and many others, where in inclusive education has been recognised as the need of the hour to educate and mainstream special needs individuals.

Inclusion refers to making provisions for all children and not excluding anybody in alignment with the goals of the RTE Act, 2009 and RPwD Act, 2016. The purpose is to welcome and celebrate diversity and improve the quality of education for all. The children should be enabled to learn with dignity and develop self-confidence to effectively deal with the situations they are in. In order to actualise the above-

mentioned aspects, the school and all stakeholders need to realise that inclusive learning tasks and collaborative pedagogical practices should be selected to teach CWSN by removing physical, social, and attitudinal barriers.

Armstrong, et al., 2011 (as cited in Miller, 2016), wrote that 'inclusion is contested within and across educational systems and in theory and practice in countries of the North and of the South' and thus the meaning of inclusion is framed according to the context. The basic idea of inclusion is education for all individuals irrespective of caste, creed, special needs, ethnicity, language barrier, regional disparities, or any kind of specific need or disadvantage.

INCLUSION AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Inclusion has been at the heart of the school reform agenda since the nineties in the education sector at different levels. Inclusion has also been seen as an emerging challenge for educational leaders with diverse children on the rise in the school system. Leithwood, et al. (1999) suggested that 'with continuing diversity, schools will need to thrive on uncertainty, have a greater capacity for collective problem solving, and be able to respond to a wider range of pupils'. Fullan (2001) described five mutually dependent components necessary for effective leadership in times of change, namely, 'moral purpose, understanding the change process, relationship building,

knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making'. Riel, 2000 (as cited in Florian, 2013) developed 'a comprehensive approach to school administration and diversity', with an intent to educate school principals to attend to three broad tasks, which are: 'fostering new meanings of diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools and building connections between schools and communities.' She goes on to consider how these tasks could be accomplished, exploring how the concept of practice, especially discursive practice, could contribute to a fuller understanding of the work of school principals.

Diwan (2009) suggested, 'some workable propositions by which schools in spite of functioning in a bureaucratic framework can become learning organizations'. She delineated commitment creating enabling conditions; some simple changes for operating the school like collective inquiry, training and professional development activities; and practitioner research. Adopting a similar perspective, Lambert, et al., 1995 (as cited in Florian, 2013) argue for a 'constructivist' view of leadership and defined it as 'the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct common meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling'. From their perspective, leadership involves interaction initiated by both students and teachers. Consequently, there is a need for collaborative

leadership, with the principal seen as the leader of leaders.

Sider, et al. (2017) wrote in their exploratory study 'to identify the types of special education training and daily issues experienced by the school principals in order to support students with special education needs'. They found five key themes including 'personal values in shaping inclusive school culture, variety in professional learning experiences, similarities in day-to-day experiences and the importance of being accessible for students and staff, the importance of leadership in fostering inclusive school culture, and the effect of critical incidents in shaping principals' leadership roles'.

In this purview of inclusion, we are looking at the transformation of schools operating within a network of systems. Our focus is on schools where school heads face challenges on account of catering to the special needs of children. The NEP 2020 proposed school complexes to be set up for providing 'improved support for children with disabilities in academic/ sports/arts/crafts events across school complexes; incorporation of art, music, language, vocational subjects, physical education, and other subjects in the classroom through sharing of teachers in these subjects.'

LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMMES

Reviewing the research to assess the pedagogical effects of leadership

preparation programmes espousing social justice, Brown, 2006 (as cited in Young, et al., 2009) found that transformative learning strategies had a positive effect on candidates' attitudes towards the issues of diversity in education. It was concluded that administrators should be aware and open to the issues of diversity before being prepared to lead for social justice and equity. Skrla, McKenzie and Scheurich, 2009 (as cited in Young, et al., 2009) have introduced tools for examining inequities, such as equity audits in leadership preparation programmes. Young, et al. (2009), have found that not much research has been done on preparation programmes, for example, instilling dispositions like social justice orientations in leader candidates.

Looking at the Indian scenario, a school head is appointed in a government-run school having five or more teachers to teach the students. In most states, the post of school head is filled based on the seniority of teachers. There is no formal training or orientation for the prospective school heads for building the vision of their schools. Generally, it takes a long bureaucratic procedure to fill the position of school head or it remains vacant. Thus, many-a-times, the senior-most teacher in the school has to perform the tasks of a school head willingly or unwillingly along with her/his teaching load with or without promotion. Except for very few states in India, there is no cadre

for principals at the school level for professional development. School heads also need a lot of motivation continuously to sustain willingly in this profession for a long time, especially while educating CWSN with diverse individual needs. Efforts at various levels are required to institutionalise and professionalise school leadership roles to sustain good school leaders and groom prospective school leaders.

The school leadership development at the national level in India is not as old as 2012 after its inclusion in the 12th Five-year Plan, in which the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) had mandated the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) to establish the National Centre for School Leadership (NCSL). Every year as a policy initiative, the NCSL conducts online and offline school leadership programmes and research on school leadership across the country. There are a few states like Gujarat, Delhi, West Bengal, and Rajasthan that have initiated to train, recruit, select, induct and evaluate school heads with varied criteria and mechanisms. Still, there are many irregularities in terms of criteria and processes for appointing a school head even in these states. A few non-governmental organisations, alone or with government agencies, conduct school leadership development programmes at the micro level but the focus of CWSN was not much visible. This aspect was substantiated

by Mythili (2015) as: 'with the help of non-governmental organisations, Departments of Education in some states (Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra) had initiated school leadership development since 2007-08'.

NEP 2020 proposed the way forward in order to achieve SDG 4 a 'school heads have to be trained on whole-school approaches, so as to adopt a more distributed leadership style.' The process to develop a distributed leadership model in school is to focus on enhanced learning to develop a shared school community, increasing the participation of both learners and their parents in school life and in formal and informal decision-making processes. In this regard, Chugh (2016) emphasised that the idea of 'distributed leadership', which carries a number of factors essential for the improvement of School Functioning has still not taken off in India. It has been well documented that 'collaborative leadership builds capacity for academic improvement of teachers (Hallinger and Heck, 2010, 2011, as cited in Mythili, 2017) whereas distributive leadership contributes to school improvement' (Gronn, 2000 and Spillane, 2006, as cited in Mythili, 2017),. Jain and Jeppesen (2014) have noted that 'Distributed Leadership (DL) has emerged as a new perspective on leadership and received considerable attention from the field of management

as well as education in the past two decades'.

The focus to prepare good school leaders should be on building the capacity of school heads rather than giving only routine training to them. There is a widespread shortage of qualified future candidates as progressive school heads in the school system. An ample amount of efforts are required for building capacities of school heads in the entire country and adequate research to inform the policy for immediate action steps to be taken to traverse this journey to generate effective school leaders in the country.

CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

There is no denying the fact that inclusive practices pose many unforeseen challenges for all the stakeholders, more so for the school leaders. The school head's facilitating role could prove to be a boon in such a scenario, where in all the stakeholders are trying hard to actualise the true spirit of inclusion. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) have found that 'including all children in education is the major challenge facing educational systems around the world, in both developing and developed countries'. School leaders set an environment that either embraces or discriminates against CWSN. Thus, a culture is created where in parents are either confident to engage with the school or feel that as an imposed activity. Leithwood, et al. (1999) suggested that, 'with

continuing diversity, schools would need to thrive on uncertainty, have a greater capacity for collective problem solving, and be able to respond to a wider range of pupils’.

In India, there is a lot of adhocism as mentioned in the previous section on the procedure to become a school head as there is no standardised guideline or policy to recruit school heads or Head Masters or Head Mistresses (HMs) or Principals. As Mythili 2017 pointed that ‘the role of a school head was not seen distinct from that of teachers’ in India until recently.’ Mythili (2015) quoted from the research conducted by Govinda (2002) and NUEPA (2010), who analysed the various systemic constraints that hinder the effective functioning of the head teacher were: ‘HMs have to function in a constrained environment; the manner of their appointment; absence of designated HMs in a large number of elementary schools; no difference between the qualifications and salary structures of HMs and teachers; lack of freedom and authority of school heads’.

Govinda (2002) further reiterated the complexities of the role of an HM and wrote that ‘the other systemic constraints faced by the HM, in a situation where the school is at the lowest level of a multi-layered system with its hierarchical nature, are that a substantial part of their academic role and mentoring leader role and mentoring have been transferred to Block Education Officers who operate through Block Resource Centres

and Cluster Resource Centres, their limited role in academic management due to centralisation of curriculum and public examination; lack of rewards and recognition linked to performance; lack of academic support to HM from the system above’. Some states have taken the lead to streamline their administrative process to appoint school heads but there are loopholes in them too. This attitude lowers the motivation and lucrativeness in this profession for prospective school heads. School heads face umpteen challenges as found by GV (2016) in her research study on practitioners’ perceptions of challenges for the school heads which “included inability to work as a team, develop interpersonal skills, reflective practice, distributed leadership, and communication skills’. It was added that ‘improved understanding of these barriers and the school heads’ perception would help create an empowering environment for the learners and also figure out important guidelines for ensuring program sustainability and effective program implementation’.

Reviewing the literature on research studies conducted in India on school leadership in relation to CWSN in mainstream classrooms, it was found that not much research work has been accomplished in this area. Chugh (2016) concluded in her review of research on school leadership and wrote that ‘there is lack of evidence-based research in India’. However, in the West, there have

been some research studies (Miller, 2016, Ainscow and Sandill, 2010) that have shown that a Principal, through his or her leadership, had a critical role in promoting inclusive practices at school. Ofsted, 2004 (as cited in Miller, 2016) wrote that 'where central ethos was centered on inclusion, students achieved more and showed better results, and where this occurred, leadership was shown to be a significant factor'. Consequently, more administrator preparation programmes had been initiated in order to meet the demand for increased accountability for the academic performance of diverse subgroups, as well as greater institutional commitments to equity and social justice.

It is a well-known fact that no two special needs children of the same special need display the same challenges during the teaching-learning process, which multiply with differing special needs. The complexities of each special need vary on account of different aspects related to the special need, the socio-economic background, age, previous learning of the child, and many other hidden or spontaneous aspects involved during the educational process. Thus, the challenges posed due to the specificities of special needs even within each special need area call for different leadership styles and practices for CWSN to actualise the inclusion practice. In the Indian context where diversity on account of the strong factors of caste, language,

socio-economic strata, and gender are deep-rooted in the social milieu, creates greater diversities leading to more complexities and thus further increased challenges for school heads to actualise inclusive education.

The pandemic has further compounded the matter to create a new situation in order to effectively educate CWSN. Thus, the situation has increased challenges manifold for the smooth functioning of its beneficiaries in the education system, and school heads are by no means left behind. They are required to be more caring, empathetic, and aware of the new specific needs of children, in particular CWSN, their parents, teachers, staff, and system-level officials. Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021) have concluded that 'leaders need to be aware of their own behaviour and its influence on others, recognise individual differences among their followers (characteristics and motivations), understand the structures available to perform specific tasks, and analyse the situational variables that impact the ability of followers to complete tasks'.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE ABOVE DISCUSSIONS?

Transformative teaching-learning strategies are essential for effective school leadership with a constructivist approach to deal with the challenges faced by school leaders. They need to learn about system change by studying systems, their

constituents, and interaction among these constituents. Chugh (2016) stated that 'research on contextual differences between schools and how that influences the forms of leadership that seem to operate within these schools is required to be taken up if want to improve and transform our schools'. She added that 'the researches do not take into account the diversity in the school system and also the different contexts in which the schools are situated. The very concept of leadership is not well understood and little attention has been paid to the capacity building of school leaders both at institutional and system level.' Further, they have to work with more innovative responses to the challenges faced while including CWSN in regular classrooms.

The school leaders need to develop necessary skills and knowledge through leadership preparation programmes to be sensitive enough to understand the usage of different leadership practices imparting inclusive education. It may be possible that for some pedagogical practices, teacher leadership has to be facilitated by the school head. In some situations and contexts, teachers, instead of principals, should take the lead role for decision making, especially involving the participation of the community in goal formation for the school to impart inclusive education, for example, by distributed leadership, and pedagogical leadership. Consequently, the

directions and pathways for good school leaders have to be backed by a strong research base lacking in the Indian context. In addition, Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021) strongly proposed that pandemic has 'forced us to sit up and take note of how we approach our responsibilities of leadership, which may have been built upon the concept of hierarchy where leaders lead, and followers follow'. It was further emphasised that school leaders need to 'unlearn old behaviours, teachings, and philosophies, and relearn skills and attitudes from scratch'.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing the recent developments concerning school leadership and inclusive practices, school leaders need to have a shared vision in order to facilitate inclusive education. Despite many unique and unexpected challenges posed before school heads who play pivotal roles for the wholesome education of children, we need to praise their accomplishments and routine work. Effective leadership pathways lead to infinite ways to achieve smiles for each child and each school. Finally, due to the dearth of existing literature on school leadership, consistent focus is required for thorough and extensive research, which would pave the way for many more explorations in the field of school education and give directions for school improvement.

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