

SSA and the Present Status of Elementary Education of Visually Impaired Children — Enrolment, Special Teachers, Braille Textbooks, Assistive Devices, Accepting Environment

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Abstract

Elementary education, which lays a foundation for life-long learning, is equally important for children with visual impairments. The major objective of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Right to Education (RTE) Act is to universalise elementary education (UEE). One of the major thrust areas of SSA therefore is on inclusion or mainstreaming Children with Special Needs (CWSN) into the fabric of formal elementary schooling. The coverage of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in 2008-09 was 27.80 lakh (91.39%), out of which 20.36% visually impaired children were enrolled in Classes I-VIII, suggesting that greater attention is needed to bring these children into schools to achieve the goal of SSA. As far as special teachers, Braille textbooks, assistive devices are concerned, the situation is not satisfactory. There is a need for an independent evaluation of the programme to assess educational benefits accruing to different categories of disabled children, particularly children with visual impairments, whose educational and other needs are different from children with locomotor handicaps.

Introduction

“Education must aim at giving the blind child a knowledge of the realities around him, the confidence to cope with these realities, and the feeling that he is recognized and accepted as an

individual in his own right.” (Berthold Lowenfeld). In the Salamanca Framework for Action (1994), Article 7, the fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever

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possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences that they may have. Inclusive school must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning, and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnership with community. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. Johnson (1994) said, "It forms an integral component of the overall education system, and is provided in regular schools committed to an appropriate education for all." Elementary education, which lays a foundation for life-long learning, is equally important for children with visual impairments. A child suffering from disability, as defined in clause (I) of section 2 of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection and Full Participation) Act, 1996, shall have the right to pursue free and compulsory elementary education in accordance with the provisions of Chapter V of the said Act.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, launched in 2001, is an effort to universalise elementary education by community-ownership of the school system. It is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country that attempts to provide an opportunity for improving human

capabilities of all children, through provision of community-owned quality education in a mission mode. The mission statement of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* says, "The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* Mission strives to secure the right to quality basic education for all children in the 6-14 years age group." It stresses a people-centred mode of implementation of educational interventions with involvement of all stakeholders, especially teachers, parents, community and Panchayati Raj Institutions and voluntary organisations. It also emphasises an equity-based approach that focuses on the needs of educationally backward areas and disadvantaged social groups including children with special needs. Chapter 5 of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* emphasises the need for education of children with special needs that includes children with visual impairments.

The aim of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* is to provide useful and relevant elementary education of satisfactory quality, with emphasis on education for life to all children in the 6 to 14 age group. There is also another goal, to bridge social, regional and gender gaps, with the active participation of the community in the management of schools. Useful and relevant education signifies a quest for an education system that is not alienating and that draws on community solidarity. Its aim is to allow children to learn about and master their natural environment in a manner that allows the fullest harnessing of their

human potential, both spiritually and materially. This quest must also be a process of value-based learning that allows children an opportunity to work for each other's well being rather than to permit mere selfish pursuits.

Method

This paper uses secondary data drawn from various documents and reports. These include *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), Revised Framework of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (2011), *Seventh All India School Education Survey* by NCERT and *Elementary Education in India* by National University of Education Planning and Administration (NUEPA).

Results and Discussion

Overview of inclusive education in the light of RTE Act and Revised SSA Framework 2011

The major objective of SSA and Right to Education (RTE) Act is to universalise elementary education (UEE). The goal of UEE has further been strengthened by the Constitutional (86th Amendment) Act, making free and compulsory elementary education a Fundamental Right of every child in the age group of 6-14 years. This Amendment has given a new thrust to the education of Children with Special Needs (CWSN), as without their inclusion, the objective of UEE cannot be achieved. Hence, education of CWSN is an important component of SSA. SSA has a provision of ₹3000 per child per year for the inclusion of disabled children. District plan for children with special needs is formulated within ₹3000 per child norm, with ₹1000

ear-marked exclusively for engagement of resource teachers. The interventions under SSA for inclusive education are identification, functional and formal assessment, appropriate educational placement, preparation of Individualised Educational Plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, resource support, removal of architectural barriers, research, monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs.

SSA ensures that every *Child With Special Needs*, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. Thus, SSA has adopted a zero rejection policy, which means that no child having special needs should be deprived of the Right to Education and taught in an environment that suits best to his/her learning needs. These include special schools, Education Guarantee Schools (EGS), Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) or even home-based education. The major thrust of SSA is on inclusion or mainstreaming CWSN into the fabric of formal elementary schooling. Experiences of programmes like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and various research findings have shown that inclusion is best determined by the individual needs of the child. Most children with special needs can be enrolled and retained in regular schools if adequate resource support is provided to them; whereas there are others who might have to be provided some kind of pre-integration

programmes before they can be mainstreamed in a classroom. Still there might also be some CWSN with severe and profound disabilities, who would require an educational programme and intensive specialised support.

Every Child With Special Needs should be placed in the neighbourhood schools with support services. These children should be given training to acquire certain skills to facilitate their elementary education as envisaged in the RTE Act. For instance, they may need mobility training, training in Braille, sign language, postural training, etc. Thus, school preparedness of Children With Special Needs must be ensured by providing 'special training' as envisaged in the RTE Act. This training may be residential, non-residential or even home based, as per their specific requirements. The existing non-formal and alternate schooling (including home based education) options for children with disabilities can be recast as 'special training'. This means that (a) all children with special needs who are not enrolled in schools or have dropped out, will first be enrolled in a neighbourhood school in an age appropriate grade, (b) they will be entitled to 'special training' through regular teachers or teachers specifically appointed for the purpose. Thus, SSA has adopted a more expansive and a broad-based understanding of the concept of inclusion, wherein a multi-option model of educating CWSN is

being implemented. The dual objective of embracing this model is to bring more CWSN under the umbrella of SSA, and to provide them appropriate need-based skills, be it vocational, functional literacy or simply activities of daily living. Further, an attempt is being made to provide these skills in the most appropriate learning environment. CWSN are also being covered through the EGS. In SSA, 51,565 CWSN are being covered through AIE/EGS in 19 States/UTs, whereas 27 states have adopted the practice of home-based education for children with severe-profound disabilities, with the objective of either preparing CWSN for schools or for life by imparting to them basic living skills. Parental counselling and vocational training are two important aspects of the entire home-based instruction programme. Through home-based education, SSA could cover 1.38 lakh CWSN. A notable feature of this programme has been an increased and a sustainable school-community linkage by actively involving parents in the educational process of their CWSN.

These practices and innovations in SSA are, no doubt, leading to a gradual increased identification of CWSN from 14.59 lakh in 2003-04 to 30.42 lakh by 2010. Similarly, the enrolment of CWSN has gone up to 25.95 lakh (85.33%) as compared to 11.71 lakh CWSN in 2003-04. More CWSN are likely to be covered through various interventions and strategies. The coverage of CWSN by 2010 was 27.80 lakh (91.39%). Besides

increasing the physical coverage, the expenditure on inclusive education in SSA has also shown an upward trend. From a mere 26% expenditure in 2003-04, the States have shown an overall expenditure of 78.88% on CWSN inclusion related activities in 2009-10 (Revised Framework of SSA, 2011). However, the quantum of expenditure cannot be considered as an indicator of actual progress. There is a need for an independent evaluation of the programme to assess educational benefits accruing to different categories of disabled children, particularly children with visual impairments. The generic term “CWSN” does not take adequate care of children with visual impairments whose educational and other needs are different from children with locomotor handicaps. The major focus of SSA Framework appears to be on children with locomotor disabilities, though occasional references have been made to other categories of children as well.

The focus of SSA is now on reaching out-of-school CWSN, not covered so far and developing a strategy that will ensure that every Child With Special Needs receives continuing on site support. This perhaps is the biggest challenge of all and a crucial determinant of the success of the Inclusive Education (IE) programme under SSA. However, there are a few important issues in IE that are being continued to be stressed upon by Government of India with the states, namely:

(i) The percentage of CWSN identified

being only 1.50% of the total child population in comparison to Census 2001, wherein 2.1% of the population has been found to have some disability. Hence, states should further streamline identification procedures.

- (ii) Monitoring mechanisms to assess both the quantitative and qualitative progress in IE to be constantly improved by states.
- (iii) Emphasis on classroom practices and teaching methods adopted by teachers for effective classroom management of CWSN.
- (iv) 58.01% schools have been made barrier-free and more schools need to be covered. Quality of ramps in most of the states is an area of concern.
- (v) To ensure that every Child With Special Needs receives continuing on-site academic support in schools.

To deal with the above issues, the revised SSA Framework 2011 claims that the following initiatives have been taken up at the national level:

- National level consultation with the national level institutions and civil society organisations working in the disability sector held to discuss the systemic changes for creating a learning environment for the CWSN.
- Sub-group with representatives of civil society organisations constituted to frame guidelines on teacher training programme, capacity building of Resource

Teachers, multi-category training and strengthening of Resource Rooms.

- A National level Resource Group on Inclusive Education proposed with representatives of national level institutions and civil society organisations.
- Survey formats for preparing the record of children at habitation level being revised to collect authentic information on CWSN.
- Detailed guidelines prepared for identification of CWSN of different categories.
- Provision for 5% sample check of the habitation-based data on CWSN through the third party.
- Larger network of the Resource Teachers and Care Givers for academic support to CWSN and teachers.
- Creating/strengthening the Resource Rooms at block level for counselling and therapeutic support to the CWSN.
- Provision for development of one resource room in every district to be accredited as RCI study centres.
- Augmentation of the BRCs with training facilities, which are also useful for trainings in IE.
- Provision for the engagement of IE volunteers on contractual basis.
- Provision for home-based Education for children with severe or profound disabilities.
- Focus on adequate availability of appropriate teaching-learning

materials, equipments and furniture.

These claims need to be verified through intensive research studies all over the country. Focus of inclusive education in the year 2011-12 would be on infrastructure development, human resource and work force development, strengthening material support to CWSN to promote effective inclusion in schools and classrooms, and strengthening schools for the enrolment and retention of all kinds of CWSN. Hence, the focus would now be on specific activities that would promote physical access, activities for ensuring enrolment and continued attendance and retention of CWSN in the schools, including provision of continuum of support services to provide quality inclusive education.

Enrolment, Special Teachers, Braille Textbooks and Assistive Devices

Seventh All India School Education Survey by NCERT included information on management-wise number of schools admitting children with disabilities, management-wise enrolment of children with different disabilities, and state-wise number of schools according to availability of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and number of teachers trained in facilitating teaching children with disabilities. However, there is no information about availability of Braille textbooks, aids and appliances in this survey. The following tables include information about children with visual impairments only.

Table 1**Management-wise Number of Schools Admitting Children with Visual Impairments**

Stage	Management	Total number of Schools	Number of Visually Impaired Children Admitted
Primary	Government	434,125	37,832
	Local Body	276,841	23,226
	Private Aided	37,541	3,083
	Private Unaided	101,914	3,659
	Total	850,421	67,800
Upper Primary	Government	144,299	14,120
	Local Body	76,447	7,940
	Private Aided	44,782	3,178
	Private Unaided	72,452	2,153
	Total	337,980	27,391

Table 1 demonstrates that the number of government schools admitting children with visual impairments in primary classes was the highest, whereas the number of private aided schools admitting visually impaired children was the lowest. The trend was almost similar in upper primary stage except that the number of private unaided schools admitting visually impaired children was the lowest.

Table 2 indicates that the number of visually impaired boys and girls

enrolled in rural schools at primary stage was highest in government schools while the lowest enrolment for boys is in private schools and for girls is in private unaided schools. As far as urban schools are concerned, private unaided schools enrolled the highest number of visually impaired boys while government schools enrolled the highest number of visually impaired girls at primary stage. The lowest number of visually impaired boys was enrolled by private aided schools whereas the lowest number of visually

Table 2
Management-wise Enrolment of Children with Visual Impairments

	Area	Government		Local Body		Private Aided		Private Unaided		Total	
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Visual impairments at primary stage	Rural	30177	22709	19502	14469	2014	1486	2250	1185	53943	39849
	Urban	2552	2470	2406	2057	2301	1820	2642	1787	9901	8134
	Total	32729	25179	21908	16526	4315	3306	4892	2972	63844	47983
Visual impairments at upper primary stage	Rural	13340	8504	7379	5236	3345	2336	1283	702	25347	16778
	Urban	2182	2062	1631	1455	2396	1971	2050	1619	8259	7107
	Total	15522	10566	9010	6691	5741	4307	3333	2321	33606	23885

impaired girls was enrolled by private unaided schools.

The enrolment of visually impaired boys and girls at upper primary stage in rural areas was the highest in government schools while it was the lowest in private unaided schools. In urban areas, the highest enrolment for visually impaired boys was in private aided schools, whereas the enrolment of visually impaired girls was in government schools. The lowest enrolment for visually impaired boys and girls was in local body schools.

As per information in the Seventh Survey, Goa and Sikkim did not have Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and trained teachers to help children with disabilities at primary and upper primary stages. Among the Union Territories, Dadar and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, and Lakshadweep did not have either of them at primary and upper primary stages. Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura states and Puducherry (UT) did not have specially trained teachers to help disabled children at primary and upper primary stages, while Chandigarh (UT) had only IEDC and trained teachers at primary stage. As per the Seventh Survey, there were 85,780 primary schools having IEDC programme and 38,300 specially trained teachers; while the number of upper primary schools having IEDC was 36,547 and 9,702 specially trained teachers.

Elementary Education in India

Analytical Report 2008-09 reveals that 20.36% visually impaired children were enrolled in Classes I-VIII in 2008-09 suggesting that greater attention is needed to bring these children into schools to achieve the goal of SSA.

No matter what the educational setting is, it is widely accepted that there can be no inclusion of CWSN without adequate resource support. This aspect has been taken care of in SSA mainly through NGOs, inclusive education Resource Teachers (RTs), volunteers, and by imparting long-term training to regular teachers on inclusion.

Twenty-eight states/UTs have appointed 12,629 Resource Teachers and 1,139 NGOs are involved in the IE programme in 33 states/UTs. An important and unique facet of this involvement is the range of activities that the NGOs have undertaken in the states for IE. These activities vary from planning for inclusion as in West-Bengal, to implementation and monitoring of IE, like in Tamil Nadu. Other States have engaged NGOs for designing and initiating innovative programmes. These include theme-based camps in Orissa, and development of low-cost/no cost Simulation Park for social inclusion of CWSN in every BRC of Tamil Nadu, to training of Key Resource Persons from the Families of CWSN in West Bengal, and preparation of adapted TLM for CWSN in Karnataka. As far as visually impaired children are concerned, 23,477 visually impaired children have

Table 3
Gender-wise Enrolment of Visually Impaired Children in
Grades I-VIII in 2008-09

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Total</i>
I	19,507	15,216	34723
II	17,365	14,542	31907
III	18,900	16,015	34915
IV	20,295	16,434	36729
V	21,351	17,652	39003
VI	22,130	18,399	40,529
VII	19,861	17,521	37382
VIII	14,000	12,584	26,584
I-V	97,418	79,859	177277
VI-VIII	55,991	48,504	104495
I-VIII Total Enrolment	153,409	128,363	281772

been provided Braille books with the help of NIVH, Dehradun, National Association of the Blind, All India Confederation of the Blind and other such reputed organisations (Revised SSA Framework, 2011).

Table 3 shows small decline in the number of visually impaired boys, while the decline in the number of visually impaired girls is large suggesting that vigorous efforts are needed to ensure enrolment and retention of visually impaired boys and girls to achieve the goal of SSA.

Accepting Environment

This author conducted studies in

sample regular schools of Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and positive attitudes towards visually impaired children and their acceptance in regular schools (Soni 2001). The classmates and teachers were very positive, though they did not undergo any training in teaching these children. The attitudes of visually impaired and other normal students towards friendship and integration, positive attitudes were found in both the groups.

In another study conducted by this author in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram (Soni

2005), it was found that teachers were least aware of facilities to the visually impaired children. Braille textbooks, aids and appliances, and other devices for the visually impaired, students were not available in the sample schools except in the laboratory of DIET in Nahan (Himachal Pradesh). These aids and appliances were available in the lab of DIET, but they were not being used in schools. Many of the teachers in Chamba district and other places did not know the meaning of visual impairment and normal children wearing glasses were considered visually impaired. However, crutches, wheelchairs and other appliances were available for children in most of the sample schools and teachers were aware of facilities to children with locomotor disabilities.

Conclusion

Although SSA has made significant contribution to the education of CWSN,

there is an urgent need to look into the problems of each category of children with disabilities separately. Each category has specific problems, and solutions have to be found to overcome them. The general term 'Children With Special Needs', though sounds very good, has done a great deal of harm to children who need greater care and attention. Each one of us has special needs and, therefore, use of this term (CWSN) is misleading. In other words, justice is not being done to the children who actually need educational interventions in the form of special teacher, aids and appliances, other educational materials and training in skill development. A huge amount of money is being spent on CWSN under SSA, and, therefore, an evaluation of the entire programme need to be done to assess actual benefits accruing to each category of CWSN and incorporate changes in policy if required.

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