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Perception of Inclusive School and Perceived Preparedness and Concerns among School Principals in Chandigarh, India

Abstract

School principals are the key participants in creating and transforming schools to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Their beliefs and attitudes towards the education of children with special needs in inclusive settings are key factors in implementing inclusive school programmes. The main aim of this study was to examine how inclusive education is perceived by the school principals of Chandigarh, India. What facilities and support are available in Chandigarh schools for children with disabilities? Besides, the study was undertaken to identify the major challenges viewed by the Chandigarh (Union Territory, India) government school principals that impede the implementation of inclusion. The data was collected from school principals through questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and observations. The results were analysed under four themes: understanding of the concept of inclusion and principal's contribution in making school inclusive for all, physical and support services in schools, in-service training of the regular teachers in inclusive education and challenges perceived by the principals in the education of disabled children in schools. The results indicated that although principals had a fairly good idea about inclusion, they did not perceive the schools were ready for inclusion of children with disabilities. Lack of infrastructure and materials resources, special educators and support services, non-cooperation from parents, large class size, and behaviour problems of children with disabilities were cited as the main concerns. The study reiterated the need for upgradation of physical facilities in the school campus, availability of equipment, materials, and teaching-learning resources as well as training of teachers and availability of services of special educators and other support services for the benefit of children with disabilities. The principals with clear vision and training in inclusive methodology will help to create an environment of acceptance, cooperation, innovation and foster creative solutions for the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Children with disabilities, Perception, Support services, Challenges

Introduction

In the 21st century, education of children with special needs has been a part of a discourse of educators as there is a paradigm shift in the education system of these children, from 'segregated instruction' to 'integrated', and now from 'integrated' to 'inclusive education' which is reflected in the national level policies and programmes that have been initiated by the government of India for CWD. Various policies and programmes including Kothari Commission (1964–1966), The National Policy on Education, 1986, the centrally

sponsored scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children, 1974 and Plan of Action, 1992 laid emphasis on the education of children with disabilities in general schools. Intending to decentralise education, a national initiative called the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was launched in 1994 for the development of elementary education. In an attempt to universalise elementary education, a programme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was brought up in the year 2001–2002. Also, the Ministry of Human Resource Development formulated a comprehensive action plan for including

children and youth with disabilities in education in the year 2005. To support the inclusive education initiative, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and RTE Amendment Act, 2012 provides for free and compulsory education to all children in the age of 6 to 14 years (till 18 years for CWD). Since India happens to be a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations General Assembly, it made way for the Rights of Persons with Disability (RPWD) Act 2016 that came into effect on 28th December, 2016 in India. The passage of the RPWD (2016) pledges a rights-based approach and equity-oriented practices for all persons with disabilities. The Act emphasises adaptations and accommodations to be made in the teaching and learning processes and methods in a class and underscores the importance of inclusive education so that CWD enjoy their rights equally with others and live with dignity and self-esteem. Finally, SSA and RMSA, the two major programmes of the Government of India dealing with general education have been merged under a comprehensive scheme called the Samagra Shiksha (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018) to look at education for all children including children with special needs in a continuum from kindergarten to class XII. Internationally, India, as a signatory to Salamanca World Declaration of 1994, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, (UNESCO, 2009) and 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development (Goal 4) have also impacted the educational services of children with disabilities attending regular schools.

Despite extensive legislations and commitment to make schools inclusive for all children, hardly any progress has been observed in improving the learning expectations from children, especially those with disabilities (McLeskey, J. & Waldron, 2015). This calls for significant changes in the way our school systems are organised and how teaching-learning is transacted across classrooms. School principals or

administrators could be the key participants and can play a momentous role in creating and transforming schools to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Their beliefs and attitudes towards the education of children with special needs in inclusive settings are key factors in implementing inclusive school programmes. Various researchers have tried to explore the perceived current knowledge and skills of principals globally regarding inclusive education (Bublitz, 2016; Choi, 2008; Dyal, Flynt & Bennett-Walker, 1996; Hofreiter, 2017; White, 2018). Gilada Avissar, Shunit Reiter & Yona Leyser (2003) argued that the severity of disability affects the perception of principals towards inclusion. Principals' age, level of education, and in-service training were found to be related to their views and practices regarding inclusion. However, a study by Ramirez (2006) points out that rather than experience or demographic factors, special education training had a positive effect on the attitude of school principals' for inclusion (Hofreiter, 2017; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Williams, 2015). The study by Chandler (2015) indicated that having friends or relatives with a disability and special education experience are significant factors for favourable attitudes towards inclusion. Downing, Spencer and Cavallaro (2004) indicated the key activities in which principals should engage to support inclusive schools including belief in inclusion, enrichment opportunities for teachers, active parent involvement and individualisation of the core. Several researchers reported that untrained teacher educators with insufficient practicum experiences using inappropriate teaching-learning approaches, large class sizes and limited resources pose hurdles to effective implementation of inclusive education (Ahsan, Sharma & Deppeler, 2012; Grönlund, Lim & Larsson, 2010; Malik, 2011; Zwane & Malale, 2018). Globally, the literature on beliefs and perception of principals and teachers on providing educational services to children with disabilities in regular classrooms indicates that inadequate infrastructure, lack of professional training, lack of



additional support, prejudice, attitudes of teachers and principals towards children with disabilities are the major impediments (Markku, 2015; White, 2018; Williams, 2015). Neves et al. (2019) analysed the meanings of the document National Policy on Special Education in the Perspective of Inclusive Education (2008) and its relevance for the definition of directions for disabled students' schooling in Brazil in the last ten years. It was highlighted that the document is not free of contradictions despite its discourse in perspective giving us the illusion of eliminating educational exclusion. The historical roots of cultural beliefs and tradition that mark the constitution of a nation shackle the implementation of public policy regarding inclusion. Therefore, the forces of exclusion co-exist along with our efforts at inclusion causing tensions, misunderstandings and ambivalence that end up showing the segregating aspects that threaten human dignity.

In India, there is a paucity of research in this area. What becomes apparent from statistics is that children with disabilities in India are most likely to drop out after the fifth class and are least likely to transition to upper primary or secondary school or vocational education (Singal, 2016). Though widely discussed for the last three decades, inclusive education has been a difficult concept to implement. Cultural beliefs and intrinsic institutional obstacles hamper the education of children with disabilities. The majority of researchers (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Parasuram, 2006; Sharma, 2002; Yadav, Das, Sharma & Tiwari, 2015) identified large class sizes, poor infrastructure and financial limitations as the major challenges for successful implementation of inclusive practices and the barrier themes identified were lack of inclusive education policy, lack of differentiation in instruction, negative effect on achievement grades, lack of professional development of teachers, parental pressure, negative attitudes, and admission policy of the school. Singal (2008) through her study also echoed the same belief that school

heads were the key factors for providing access to children with disabilities in regular schools. Urgent reforms in teacher training programmes, knowledge about skills related to inclusion, inclusive classroom practices and curriculum adaptation are needed for social inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities (David & Kuyini, 2017; Srivastava, A.de Boer, Pijl, 2017; Tiwari & Sharma, 2015). Bakhshi P., Babulal G.M., Trani J.F. (2017) showed concern regarding drop-out of these children at a much early stage of schooling than non-disabled children. An NCERT paper (2007) reflected that "In India, the concept of Inclusive Education has not yet been linked to a broader discussion of pedagogy and quality education. Any broad reform in education cannot be implemented without taking the inclusion of learners with SEN into consideration (p. 33)". The literature indicates the perception and attitude of general teachers towards inclusive education, however, there has been a dearth of studies in India regarding the understanding of inclusive education and the support that is required in schools from the school principals' perspectives. The research questions for this study included the following questions:

1. How do principals understand the term "inclusive school for all" and what is their contribution to making school inclusive for all?
2. What are the physical facilities and support available in their school for the education of children with disabilities?
3. What type of in-service training is provided to train teachers in inclusive education?
4. What are the major challenges faced by them in making school inclusive for children with disabilities?

Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of the study, it was necessary to select a sample of an inclusive school where children with special needs were enrolled. The principals from the government

schools for this study were selected through purposeful sampling. Chandigarh has a good network of 114 government schools organised in 20 clusters with a total of 4,087 children with disabilities enrolled in schools. Barring a few, all schools are composite, covering grades I to X/XII (Department of Education, Chandigarh Administration). Ten clusters were selected purposively and thirty principals from the selected thirty government schools were included to examine how inclusive education is perceived. The authors adhered to the ethics of research, and data was collected after getting written consent. In order to understand their opinion about inclusive education, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. It comprised of three main questions: (a) concept of inclusive education and Contribution of the school for implementing inclusion; (b) physical facilities and resources for Children with Disabilities in schools and (c) challenges in implementing inclusive education. Observations were also done by the researchers to verify the responses given by the school principal wherever possible.

Table 1: Enrollment of Children with Disabilities in Selected Schools

School	Total Enrolment	No. of CWD Enrolled	Percentage of CWD
	734	10	1.36
	1200	33	2.75
	2500	43	1.72
	2027	28	1.38
	2056	18	0.87
	1160	33	2.84
	1103	45	4.07
	2313	49	2.1
	1200	20	1.66
	1307	25	1.91
	621	18	2.89

	1161	18	1.55
	809	19	2.34
	343	12	3.49
	1225	14	1.14
	524	17	3.24
	1830	21	1.14
	863	40	4.63
	2027	52	2.56
	850	20	2.35
	1566	27	1.72
	1557	51	3.27
	818	24	2.93
	1428	29	2.03
	1000	5	0.5
	831	19	2.28
	2000	17	0.85
	1067	17	1.59
	2021	56	1.90
	1234	46	2.77

Table 2: Percentage of Enrollment of CWD in Selected Schools

Percentage of Enrolment of CWD	No. of schools
Enrolment of CWD between 0-1%	03
Enrolment of CWD between 1-2%	11
Enrolment of CWD > 2%	16

The enrollment data of children with disabilities along with the percentage of children with disabilities in thirty selected government schools are presented in Tables 1 and 2. According to census 2011, the total population of India is 121 Cr, out of which 2.68 Cr is disabled (2.21 per cent). An analysis of census 2011 data of children with disabilities enrolled in schools of Chandigarh revealed that around 2,14,227 children (between the

5–19 years of age) were attending school, of which 3,517 were disabled. The enrollment of children with disabilities in schools in Chandigarh is similar to the national level and comes out to be 1.64 per cent. The enrollment data of selected schools reveals that three schools had an enrolment of less than 1 per cent, eleven schools had enrolment between 1–2% and around sixteen schools had enrolment percentage greater than 2 per cent. The initiatives of Government of India like the RTE Act and 'Zero rejection' policy under SSA, ensuring that no child is refused admission on any grounds, seems to be working as far as access to educational institutes and admission of children with disabilities in regular schools is concerned. However, the mere presence of children with a disability does not ensure their “inclusion” and participation in class. There is a need to extensively examine the readiness of the schools concerning inclusive education and the major factors contributing to or impeding the inclusive education.

Table 3: Profile of Selected Government School Principals (N=30)

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
Gender	Male	8	26.6
	Female	22	73.3
Training in inclusive education	Yes	4	13.3
	No	26	86.6
Educational qualifications	MSc. /M.A. and Bachelor in Education	22	73.3
	B.A. /B.Sc. with Bachelor in Education	6	20
	JBT with Bachelor in Education	2	6.6
Location of the school	Rural	12	40
	Urban	18	60

Type of school	Government Model High School (GMHS)	13	43
	Government Model Senior Secondary School (GMSSS)	17	57

The profile of the government school principals has been tabulated in Table 3. Of these participants, twenty-two principals (73.3 per cent) were female and eight (26.6 per cent) were male principals. Analysis of the data indicated that only four (13.3 per cent) had received training in inclusive education and twenty-six (86.6 per cent) said they have not received any training in inclusive education for children with disabilities. Besides, the educational qualifications of school principals are also varied, twenty – two (73.3 per cent) school principals were post-graduate in humanities or science with a bachelor in education, six (20 per cent) were graduate in humanities or science with a bachelor in education and two (6.6 per cent) of the principals had completed JBT (junior basic training) along with bachelor in education. Twelve (40 per cent) worked in schools located in a rural area and eighteen (60 per cent) worked in an urban area. Thirteen (43 per cent) of the principals worked in government model high school (schools up to Class X) and seventeen (57 per cent) of the principals worked in government model senior secondary schools (schools up to Class XII).

Results

Understanding of the concept of an inclusive school for all and their contribution to make school inclusive for all

On being asked about the concept of inclusive education, different views were collected from the principals. From the collected data, it has been found that the majority of the principals reported that Inclusion is

- enrolling all children into school without any discrimination
- a system under which children with disabilities are admitted in a regular school and taught under one roof
- a system of education for all
- including disabled kids in a regular school and bring them into the mainstream
- giving equal educational opportunity to all irrespective of their disabilities.

After being asked about their contribution to making school inclusive for all, the majority of the school principals followed the directions given by the Chandigarh Education Department which includes not denying admission to any child. Surprisingly, principals from rural areas were more concerned about the education of children with disabilities.

In a discussion with the school principal from a rural area, she stated:

“We introduced meditation and yoga classes for all children and special attention was given to children with disabilities so that they can take part in these classes. Special counseling sessions for children with special needs and their parents are arranged as they are from a low socio-economic status and are labour class.”

In this regard, one school principal narrated:

“I have arranged classes for children with disabilities on the ground floor and smart classrooms have been developed with audio-visual aids for them. It is always personally ensured that the resource teacher works in collaboration with the regular teachers to educate them.”

In another school, the principal explained:

“All the children with disabilities are treated and taught equally with their peer group. Children with disabilities are inspired and motivated by sharing motivational stories and video clippings. A bias-free environment is created in school. Teachers are motivated to attend training programmes on inclusive education and parents are motivated to enroll children with disabilities in school.”

It is clear from Table 3 that only 4 principals out of the total 30 received any kind of training in special needs. The principals discussed that there was no training program specially designed for school principals and most of them had no clue how to go about addressing the needs of children with disabilities along with other children in school. Whatever they were doing was their own initiative, based on their understanding of the concept of inclusion. There are no clear-cut guidelines regarding steps to be undertaken, policies to be devised or structures to be created within the school to support inclusion. Each principal had to devise their own ways of dealing with the situation. While reviewing school documents, it was observed that there was no effort on the part of the principal to plan for a school-wide programme to integrate children with disabilities. None of the principals interviewed could show any document related to a quarterly or annual planning for parent interactions, sensitisation sessions for students and teachers, neither did they bother to develop any guidelines for teachers or students with respect to children with disabilities. Most of these initiatives were intermittent and aimed at fulfilling the departmental compliance needs.

Although most principals exhibited a positive attitude of acceptance and took steps to ensure there were special toilets for children with special needs, they were seated in the same classroom as other children; segregation, wherever it was seen, was for pull-out sessions with a special educator or counselor. Similarly, principals hardly took time to look at the curriculum adaptation needs or teaching strategies to be employed in the inclusive classrooms for the benefit of these children. There was a CWSN incharge in every school entrusted with the task of maintaining records of number and category of children with special needs in school and filing reports related to them to the department. We could also not find any record pertaining to performance of special children through which principals could track their progress or achievement. It was

largely left to the resource teacher or the visiting special educator.

Table 4: Units, Categories, and Themes regarding Principals' Understanding of Inclusive Schools and their Contributions to Make their Schools Inclusive for Children with Disabilities

Units	Categories	Themes
<p>Understanding the Term Inclusive School</p> <hr/> <p>School in which all types of students can take admission without any discrimination Enrolment of all children in the school without any discrimination An inclusive school is a school which admits all types of children despite differences (mental/ physical/social/ emotional) It means all students are welcome in school irrespective of differences they have. All have equal rights and opportunities.</p> <hr/> <p>Education for all even for those who were not able to get it earlier. It helps society and such children to be in the mainstream with the help of education. It means school is for all Inclusive school for all in which all types of children are enrolled and study in a regular classroom and regular school. Inclusive school for all in which children with special needs study with normal students in normal class and normal school. CWSN students will study with regular ones A school in which all students study together irrespective of gender, caste, creed, disability CWSN should be taught along with normal children.</p>	<p>Admission without any discrimination</p> <p>Education of CWSN into a normal classroom with normal kids</p>	<p>Admission policy based on non-discrimination; every child has an opportunity to study in a normal school</p> <p>Children with disabilities study together with their peer group (non-disabled children), education is provided keeping in view the individual differences</p>
<p>Contribution in Making School Inclusive for Children with Disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training is given to all teachers to enhance their knowledge and interest • Sensitisation programme • Awareness programme with parents • Special resource room • Provision of ramps and special toilets • Learning corner • Classrooms at ground level <hr/> <p>Work on activities of daily living skills Counseling of students Separate syllabus Vocational subjects Need-based assessments/preparation of separate question papers Audio-visual aids</p>	<p>Training to teachers, parents and special educator</p> <p>Physical facilities in school</p> <p>Changes in the daily schedule, method, and assessments were made to provide education to children with disabilities</p>	<p>Awareness and sensitisation programme for the staff members and parents are conducted to make school inclusive for children with disabilities Infrastructural facilities are arranged in schools for children with disabilities. Adaptation and Modification in curriculum</p>

Physical Infrastructure, teaching-learning Facilities and human resources

According to Mitchell (2015), “physical access ensures that all the elements of the indoor physical environment that may affect students' ability to learn are optimal.” Most schools in Chandigarh do not have appropriate physical infrastructure and teaching-learning facilities that meet the needs of all types of disabilities. The observations by the researchers in our study along with the responses analysed from the questionnaire filled by the principals regarding infrastructure and teaching-learning facilities available in schools reflected that in 60 per cent schools ramps were available, 53 per cent had modified furniture, 56 per cent had proper signage and 60 per cent schools had special toilets. Additionally, 60 per cent of schools had a resource room, 76 per cent had audio-visual aids, 16 per cent used a speech-to-text and text-to-speech software and only 13 per cent schools had screen reading software. For children with visual and hearing impairment, such types of teaching-learning materials are essential for meaningful participation in class. It was also observed that the schools do not have teaching-learning facilities as per the proportion of the number of children with disabilities enrolled in the schools. Though the Minister of State for Urban Development, Government of India has provided a practical framework in the form of a document titled Harmonized Guidelines and Space Standards for Barrier-Free Built Environment for Persons with Disability and Elderly Persons 2015 or Barrier-Free Designs with universal access, responding to the varying needs of the persons with disabilities, even then the schools don't have basic infrastructure to facilitate access. The observations and the responses by the principals indicate that the government schools in Chandigarh, India, did not have teaching-learning resources to support the learning of children with disabilities. As far as human support is concerned, in government

schools of Chandigarh, 83 per cent of the school principals responded that they have special educators, while only 36 per cent and 23 per cent of schools provided services of a speech therapist and occupational therapist respectively to children with disabilities.

Table 5: Responses of the School Principals on Facilities Available in Schools Concerning Physical Infrastructure, Teaching-learning Resources and Human Support

S. No.	Support in Schools	Appropriate (number of schools with %age)	In-appropriate (number of schools with %age)
I	Physical Infrastructure		
a	Ramps	18 (60%)	12 (14%)
b	Furniture according to needs of CWSN	16 (53%)	14 (46%)
c	Signage/ directions to negotiate the campus	17 (56%)	13 (44%)
d	Special toilets	18 (60%)	12 (14%)
II	Teaching-learning Resources		
a	Resource room	18 (60%)	12 (14%)
b	Audiovisual aids	23 (76%)	7 (23%)
c	Speech to text & text to speech software	5 (16%)	25 (84%)
d	Screen reading software	4 (13%)	26 (87%)
III	Human Resources/ Support for CWSN		
a	Special educator	25 (83%)	5 (16%)
b	Speech therapist	11(36%)	19 (63%)
c	Occupational therapist	7(23%)	23 (76%)



The principals in our study indicated that the services of special educators remain a major concern. Although 25 schools reported availability of special educators, yet in most cases, these were only available on a part-time or visiting basis. Only 18 schools reported having a resource room but majority did not have a resource teacher. The services of specialists were also intermittently available through camps organised at the cluster level. All the neighbouring schools under that cluster had to send their children, in that particular disability, to the cluster school to avail the services although transport was provided in most cases or fare was reimbursed. The resource materials, modified laboratory equipment, ICT resources to supplement classwork, Braille equipment and printer, play equipment and specially designed swings were also not available in the schools. Either most schools did not encourage children with special needs to go to a playground or the laboratories, or such children required to take help of their peers. Quite a lot of special needs children in informal interactions could not recall the last time they visited the playground. The time table also did not reflect any regular period for games, computers and laboratory visits. Although only 18 schools had ramps, handrails and special toilets, two principals showed us the letters they had written to the department for sanction to construct ramps and toilets for children with disabilities and were awaiting approval.

The majority of school principals wanted full-time special educators and other support services. They said:

“Special educators are appointed by the Department of Education, Chandigarh. Every special educator is appointed for a cluster, in which they cover around 6–7 schools. This indicates that there is no permanent special educator for one school. The special educator keeps moving from one school to another as per the schedule assigned by the Cluster Head. Due to the non-availability of special educators in one school, the educational programmes prepared for children with

disabilities are not being implemented effectively. As a result, they do not perform well in academics and often lag behind their peer groups. The services of speech and occupational therapists are not regularly available. The students get these services only during camps which are organised monthly, quarterly, or annually as per the cluster.”

In-service training of teachers in inclusive education

Principals were asked about how many regular teachers in their schools were trained in inclusive education and in what way. It was clear from their responses that every year department of education, Chandigarh conducts in-service training programme for the teachers and it is compulsory for at least two teachers from the school to register for the programme.

One of the principals spoke on the training of teachers in inclusive education:

“Every year, the department conducts professional development training programmes in inclusive education for subject teachers on intellectual disabilities, hearing impairment, visual impairment, autism, and so on. We send at least one teacher from the school. The training programmes are three to fifteen days long. Most of the teachers in my school have got training in inclusive education.”

From the interview, it has been found that although teachers attend training programmes of various durations (3-day, 5-day, 7-day, 10-day or 15-day) conducted by the Department of Education, yet the main concern is to ascertain how far they are equipped to teach children with disabilities in a normal classroom. It has been observed that there is a dire need for extensive training for teachers in inclusive education. The existing research in India also raises concerns on implementation (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013; Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013).

The principals reported that although the teachers in their schools were attending training programmes in inclusive education

organised by the Department of Education, still most teachers were not confident in dealing with children with disabilities as most of such programmes were theoretical in nature and did not provide any real practical exposure in addressing the needs of children with special needs. They still struggled in classrooms trying to ascertain how to modify the curriculum to the needs of children under their care and how to strike a balance between teaching the rest of the class and individualise instruction to suit specific needs. Although a lot of commitment was visible on the part of the principals to help accommodate these children, the lack of basic training in inclusive education was a hindrance in developing a vision for an inclusive school set-up.

Challenges in Education of disabled children in schools

Principals of the school reported many challenges to make school inclusive with regard to CWSN. The majority of school principals reported that they need permanent resource teachers to teach these students and do not have appropriate infrastructure in their school as per the requirements of children. Moreover, the special educator in most schools visited once a week. In case of a holiday on the day of the scheduled visit, the subsequent visit would occur at a gap of 10–15 days. This resulted in a huge gap, and they would have to start afresh creating a further lag in learning. Since one special educator is catering to all the children of that disability in that school, sometimes children from neighbouring schools who fall in the same cluster also attend the class together—the class size may be as large as 80 children. This defeats the very purpose of providing personal attention and a small group interaction with the special educator.

A review of the records maintained by the special educator and the allocation of time table show that there was no time allotted to the special educator and class teacher for collaboration and planning educational programmes for children with special needs.

Observation and informal interactions with teachers in the staff room revealed that there was no ownership of the class teacher or subject teacher for the children with special needs. Though they would remain seated in the class, most teachers thought that the responsibility lay with the special educator alone. Very few teachers took the initiative to attend to them in class and carried forward the work assigned by the special educator. Principals held the view that children with special needs have various behavioural problems that are difficult to tackle and the same percentage of principals reported that mentally retarded and learning-disabled children were quite difficult to teach. The principals also reported that due to a huge class strength, the class teacher could not give individual attention to the special students. There is no technology in the school to teach them and they are not able to follow the same syllabus so there is a need to modify the curriculum for them.

Among other major problems stated by the school heads was a non-cooperation from parents of special children. The principals felt that being uneducated, daily wagers prevented such parents from understanding the problems faced by their children in basic reading and writing. They too, on their part, could not provide any kind of support at home but expected their children to perform like their peers at school. Some parents didn't attend parent-teacher meetings regularly—if the special educator suggested further tests, the parents would not be available for a follow-up. This became a hindrance in properly identifying the problem and getting a disability certificate for the child. The principals also added that that lack of parental counseling, non-availability of specialists, fewer awareness camps, etc., were some of the challenges which hindered the way to successful inclusion of children with special needs.

One principal said that *“the presence of CWSN in regular classrooms creates disturbance to other students while learning. Too much absenteeism and lack of parent*



cooperation make it difficult to teach such children in a regular school.”

It is clear that while school principals were making efforts in providing school education to children with disabilities, but due to the lack of training, the non-cooperative attitude of parents, lack of infrastructure and services of special educators and other professionals, it became difficult for them to make inclusive education successful. The lack of resources has been a major barrier in the implementation of inclusive education in India (Rotatori, et al., 2014).

Discussion

Understanding of the concept of inclusive school for all and principal's contribution to make school inclusive

Most principals were aware of the policies of the Government of India and were following them in their schools in terms of admission of children with disabilities in the school and non-discrimination on any grounds. Some of the principals were very concerned about the children with disabilities and were proactively working to integrate them with the mainstream. Sharma (2002) supported the view that principals showed initiative in making schools inclusive. Singal (2008) also reported that school heads were the main initiators in providing access to children with disabilities in regular schools. The principal of the school plays a significant role in defining school policy, vision and accepting culture in the school. The school principals expressed the desire for a special training programme aimed exclusively to address the needs of school heads that would equip them to create an inclusive set-up in their schools. In the absence of basic understanding of educational needs of children with disabilities and how best to serve them in regular schools, the principals were unable to devise any whole-school policies or programmes. The principal of the school has to show a commitment and have a vision for inclusion to work on the ground.

With the emphasis on competency-based education in NEP 2020 and focus on learning outcomes, the principals need to follow up on the progress of children with disabilities to prevent drop-outs and to ensure that the children are engaged in meaningful learning experiences in classrooms. This would also help in developing future plans regarding teacher training needs or providing remediation classes or adopting specific teaching strategies to support children who would either be lagging behind or facing learning difficulties. This can only happen if principals had the knowledge of inclusive pedagogy and expertise to support learning of students with disabilities and a firm belief that all children could learn if provided enabling environment and opportunities.

In terms of the contribution made by the school principal in making the school inclusive, the principals were proactively involved in upgrading the infrastructure of the school, arranging awareness sessions for parents and teachers about disabilities, modification, and adaptation of the curriculum to meet the needs of children with disabilities, teaching daily living skills and vocational skill training. There were still areas where they felt overwhelmed as there was lack of any comprehensive guidelines from the department. The paucity of proper equipment, resources and resource personnel thwarted their attempts at providing appropriate learning environment to these children.

The new policy initiatives of the government have brought children with disabilities in regular schools, a fact amply supported by rising enrollment numbers of children with disabilities. But without proper preparation and arrangements in place, these children will be deprived of meaningful educational experiences and may drop out. Singal (2008) also pointed out that simply allowing children to sit with their peers in regular schools will not result in “inclusion” unless effort is made to combat the exclusionary forces in play in the so-called “inclusive schools.” Thus, all possible support structures in

terms of physical infrastructure, equipment, teaching-learning material, curriculum support, trained and skilled human resource personnel must be provided for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Physical Infrastructure, teaching-learning Facilities, and human resources

Most of the school principals reported that they did not have proper infrastructure and appropriate resources to meet the requirements of children with disabilities. There was a paucity of teaching-learning materials, ICT support and a lack of trained teachers, resource teachers and special educators. Most schools either did not have a special educator or one special educator was being shared by a group of schools falling in one cluster. The services of specialists like speech therapists and occupational therapists were available only in camps organized at the cluster level. The concerns expressed by principals find resonance in the work of other researchers in the field of special education (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Kundu, Bej & Rice, 2019; Sharma & Desai, 2002). All efforts to get children with disabilities into regular schools will be stymied in the absence of adequate material resources and a pool of dedicated trained human personnel. When children are already attending school, this scramble for putting together teaching-learning materials, arranging for teacher training, devising a curriculum for diverse needs of learners not only wastes the precious learning years of children with disabilities but also increases the likelihood of dropouts if they do not find classroom experience engaging enough. There is an urgent need to plug these loopholes if the various initiatives of the Government and recent legislations have to be put into practice successfully.

In-service training of teachers in inclusive education

The principals reported that they regularly send their teachers to attend in-service training programmes ranging from 3–15 days.

Since it is compulsory for a school to enroll at least two teachers to the training programmes that are arranged every year, most schools are sending teachers intermittently starting with the ones they can easily spare. Such training is not based on the needs of teachers but is generalised in nature; in most cases, it focusses on various disabilities instead of emphasis on inclusion, which should be the case. Although most principals stated that almost all their teachers have attended some form of training, how far this centralized, one-size-fits-all training is effective is doubtful. It emerged from interactions with principals that no effort was made by the department to understand the needs of the teachers, so what was such training targeted at? Instead of haphazard one time or block training, the department needs to have a continuous, structured, on-going professional development programme for teachers. Singal (2008) also pointed out that teachers did not regard themselves as equipped to address the needs of children with disabilities. Teachers are crucial to the successful integration of children with disabilities in the classroom by providing a stimulating and engaging social environment. Hence, the need for effective training of teachers cannot be overemphasised. Teachers not only need knowledge about disabilities but inclusive teaching methods and strategies to be employed to address the needs of a diverse group of learners in their classrooms (Srivastava, M., A. de Boer, A. & Pijl, S.J. 2017, Tiwari, Das & Sharma, 2015). Besides in-service training, an urgent need is also felt for undertaking reform of teacher education curriculum that should reflect the current needs of teachers who are having to deal with a great diversity of learners in their classroom like never before and extensive practical component in teaching in inclusive schools to be compulsory part of training.

Challenges in Education of disabled children in schools

Principals cited the lack of appropriate physical infrastructure, permanent resource



teacher, trained teachers, co-operation from parents, awareness, ICT resources, large class size, behaviour problems among children with disabilities, curriculum modification needs as major impediments to the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools. According to them, it was particularly difficult to teach children with intellectual impairment and those with learning disabilities along with other children. This was also highlighted by Singal (2008) that teachers were more accepting of children with physical and sensory disabilities (eg. visual impairment) as these children could be taught along with other children in a routine. This is indicative of the fact, that there is great resistance or skill deficient among the regular teachers to adopt their classroom instruction according to the needs of learners. The lack of specialists and support structures to the teachers further makes the situation tough for teachers. There have been many studies supporting the lack of resources, trained teachers, cultural beliefs, and systemic institutional barriers for failure in the implementation of inclusive education (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Kundu, Bej & Rice, 2019; Tiwari, Das & Sharma, 2015). Although there is now increasing awareness and acceptance of inclusion of children with disabilities, the dearth of resources and unmet training needs of teachers jeopardizes the successful implementation of inclusion of children with disabilities.

Conclusion

The successful implementation of inclusive education requires a paradigm shift in the way our school systems are organised. For a shift from “segregated” education to “inclusive” education fundamental reorganisation is required at all levels of school education starting from the philosophy and belief systems. It will take great effort for course correction for an education system that has been operating on performance at the year-end exam as the goal of education. It would require all stakeholders to critically analyse

their beliefs and realign with “education for all” in principle, that would require a rethinking as to how we can include all kinds of learners, how to take everyone along. The study aimed to examine how principals as heads of institutes perceive the concept of inclusion and how equipped they perceive their schools are to address the needs of children with disabilities.

The analyses of data collected from the study revealed that although school principals have a fairly good understanding of the concept of “inclusion”, most of them perceive their schools to be unprepared to establish an inclusive school for all. The results of the study provide valuable insights from the perspective of school principals in terms of understanding of the term “inclusion”, their efforts towards making their schools inclusive, the perceived concerns, and challenges in implementing inclusive education. The study reiterated the need for upgradation of physical facilities in the school campus, availability of equipment, materials, and teaching-learning resources as well as training of teachers and availability of services of special educators and other support services for the benefit of children with disabilities. The study also highlighted the need to review teacher training programmes with a focus on the needs of teachers, type of training, duration and the themes to be undertaken in such programmes. No doubt teachers are the key element in translating an inclusive curriculum in the classroom but in the absence of a clear cut inclusive policy and administrative support, even a teacher with the best of training will not be able to function with optimum efficiency. The principals with clear vision and training in inclusive methodology will help create an environment of acceptance, cooperation, innovation, and foster creative solutions for the implementation of inclusive education. India is still struggling with finding the best ways to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. Such innovative approaches seeped in our cultural ethos and methodologies will show us the

best way to move forward and may help us define “inclusion” in a better way.

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