

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES, OUTCOMES AND LIMITATIONS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF WEST BENGAL: A MIXED METHOD STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Education is the pathway to development and progress. It lays the foundations for the betterment of society. Right from the Vedic age education has played a central role in our country and with the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2002 the 'Right to Education' entered into Part III of the constitution becoming a Fundamental Right under Article 21A. Even as various policies and legislations in our country work towards securing "Education for All" there still remains a section of children that are deprived and often denied this right. These are the Children with special needs (CWSN) who often require additional assistance, a lot of patience and varied forms of support in an educational set up. With the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's "No rejection policy" in place, no school can deny admission to a child with special needs, however on the admission of the child it is the environment of the school that emerges as a major challenge. While the Right to Education Act (2009) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) contains provisions for an inclusive educational set up in all schools across the country, CWSN continue to face the brunt of discrimination, rejection, lack of support and other innumerable hurdles in schools. Thus this study aims to understand the effect of inclusive practices in the government schools of West Bengal. A sample of 20 government primary schools from the districts of Hooghly and Howrah in West Bengal were included in this research study. The sequential mixed method approach was implemented and with the assistance of structured interview schedules and in-depth interview guides data was collected from head teachers, class teachers and parents of CWSN in order to derive detailed knowledge on the inclusive practices in these schools.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Education, Children with Special Needs, Persons with Disabilities.*

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### Introduction

Education is the keystone to development and progress. With the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment of 2002, Education was placed under Article 21 A of the Indian constitution thereby becoming a Fundamental Right (PTI, 2013). While several legislations and policies have been enacted for securing the Right to Education for children across the nation, there still remains a segment of children who remain disadvantaged in the field of advancement and academics. These are the children with special needs (CWSN). According to recent statistics 2.68 crore people in India are disabled of which 56% are males and 44% are females. Reports also state that the highest number of disabled persons is found between the age group of 10-19 years i.e. 46.2 lakhs (MOSPI, 2017). This remains a crucial age not solely for the physical development of a child but also for the academic, recreational and all round growth of the individual. Hence it is here that educational institutions play an important role for CWSN.

In the post- independence period, segregated forms of education remained prominent in India in the forms of special schools for the blind, deaf and non- verbal. Gradually with time the concept of integration was carried forward where students with special needs were admitted into regular schools in order to integrate them into mainstream life. It was only in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century where seeds of inclusion were planted for the very first time with the "Zero- rejection Policy" introduced by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). This policy has been a major milestone in inclusive education because it prohibits any form of denial/discrimination in purposes of admission to students with special needs in mainstream schools.

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Reports also suggest a sharp increase in the enrollment of CWSN from a level of 14.02 lakh in year 2009-2010. (Mahajan, 2014) Following this a significant development was the ratification of the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) by India in the year 2007 (Chapter IV, Human Rights, 2006). This convention strongly leans in favor of Inclusive education practices in schools across the globe. Post these developments, the Right to Education Act (2009) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) have emerged as major milestones in strengthening the steps towards Inclusive education for persons with disabilities in India. Despite the prevalence of eminent legislations, CWSN continue to face several disadvantages in educational institutions across the country due to the faulty execution of the existing laws and policies. While the system of inclusive education mandates for the creation of an environment that is conducive to the needs of children with disabilities, the practice of inconsistent integration prevails whereby students with disabilities are inducted into mainstream schools by faculties due to fear of the law (zero-rejection policy) however post induction such students remain neglected within the confines of mainstream schools due to the lack of awareness, inconsistent application of inclusive practices, prevailing stigma against disabilities and inefficient practices in administration which results in the inability to secure the right to education of children with special needs, which further corresponds with failure to meet with the demands of Article 21 A of the constitution. The outcome of which is the denial of an essential fundamental right to CWSN. Hence the aim of the research study was to understand the effect of inclusive education practices in primary schools, whilst placing adequate attention on the application of the Right to Free and compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD, 2016)

### Methods

This execution of this research study was done with the assistance of the sequential mixed method research design. The research was carried out in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah in the state of West Bengal. A sample of 20 government primary schools was selected via the purposive sampling method while structured interview schedules and in-depth interview guides were constructed and validated for the purpose of data collection. The major participants of this study comprised of head teachers, teachers, parents and special educators working in relation to CWSN admitted into government primary schools of the concerned districts, the results of the study were further analyzed through the application of simple descriptive statistics and thematic analysis with the assistance of SPSS and Atlas ti software's.

### Results

This section of the paper comprises of the results obtained from the research study conducted. While inclusive education in India is almost two decades old, its implementation as a system is still found to be relatively new and unknown to most schools in districts across the nation. Hence owing to the prevalence of such ignorance CWSN remain neglected while repeatedly battling existing odds in schools, playgrounds and amongst most community members. Even though ample amount of time has surpassed since the incorporation of the concept of inclusive education in schools, actual inclusive practices are yet to blend into the ground base of educational institutions. Through this research study some of the major areas requiring modifications for the successful implementation of inclusive practices have been detected. These areas include the following:

#### Curriculum Deficits

Table 1

Requirement	Yes	No
Modification in curriculum for CWSN	6.25%	93.75%
Individualized education plans for CWSN	6.25%	93.75%
Mechanisms to monitor progress	0%	100%

According to recent legislations, it is mandatory for schools to ensure modification in their curriculum to meet with the needs of the students with disabilities in their school. However based on the data collected in this research study, it is clearly evident that only 6.25% of the schools visited had abided by such changes while a majority of 93.75% of schools still follows old curriculums with zero modifications. Mrs. Saha (Name changed) teacher of a school in the district of Howrah made the following remarks pertaining to the existing curriculum "No such changes have been made in the curriculum. The same books are being used for years on end. No toys or games are provided by the government, nor do we as teachers receive any training from the government. The sub inspector people do not even visit. Children with special needs and their parents literally waste their time here. They don't learn anything. There is zero implementation of government policy happening."

Having individualized education plans is an important curricular aspect for ensuring the development and learning of CWSN in a classroom environment. Mr. Bhavnu (name changed) class teacher of a school from the district of Hooghly stated the following “So if in a particular class we have planned to teach the students how to count 1-50 in a day we know that it will take 5 of those classes for a child with special needs to cope up with the same. It is difficult for us as teachers to see but we have to be very patient with them.” Hence having individual plans for each student with a special need will ensure that the plan made is student oriented in nature and at the same time assist the teacher in understanding the nature of progression on part of the special needs child. However based on the data in Table I, it is clearly discernable that only 6.25% of the schools had provisions for individualized education plans for CWSN, while a majority of 93.75% had made no such attempts.

Based on the data mentioned in the table above, it can be clearly seen that none of the schools have provisions in place to follow-up on the improvements in CWSN post their enrollment into a mainstream classroom environment.

**Table 2: Infrastructural Impediments**

<b>Infrastructural Facilities</b>	<b>Provided by School (%)</b>	<b>Not Provided by School (%)</b>
Transportation facilities for CWSN	0%	100%
Para-Teachers available in school	25%	75%
Attendants to supervise CWSN	0%	100%
Ramp facilities	25%	75%
Provision of special toilets	0%	100%
Special seating arrangements for CWSN	56.25%	43.75%
Special lighting arrangements for CWSN	0%	100%
Behavioral management strategies for CWSN	0%	100%

The data compiled in the table above focuses on the infrastructural facilities available for students with disabilities in the primary schools. Travel is often found to be a major challenge for students with disabilities and parents who have to transport their child to and from school. Yet in the data presented in the table above, it can be seen that none of the schools provide transportation facilities for students with special needs. Mrs. Mahua (name changed) mother of a child with Autism states the following “It is not easy because I live in the interiors of Serampore. It takes an hour to reach the station. Then from the station the school is 3 stations away. But as he is getting older it is not easy to travel with him because his behavior is unpredictable and he is always hyper. So travelling in the train with him is very risky but the I have to do it for him, I can't just let him stay at home all day.”

Para-teachers often play an important role in assisting the class teachers in the schools. Based on the data found in the table above, it can be seen that in only 25% of the schools Para-teachers are employed while 75% of the schools do not have any Para-teachers at all . According to Mrs. De (name changed) parent of a child with multiple disabilities “More specially trained teachers are needed in regular schools. We need teachers who can understand the pain of such children. Also specially trained teachers are required in schools that are aware of these disabilities and can handle the kids with a lot of care and compassion without getting paranoid or angry.”

Children with special needs tend to be hyperactive, curious and often in need of support in basic activities like going to the toilet or eating food. They also have the tendency to wander about. Hence it is here that the role of attendants is important in maintaining sharp supervision over students with disabilities during school hours. However based on the data found in the table above, it is clearly visible that none of the schools employ attendants to supervise the needs and movements of CWSN during school hours. Mrs. Mitra (name changed) mother of a child with multiple disabilities says “I spend most of my time in school to assist my daughter. Even when helpers are around they choose to not help my daughter. Given her disabilities they seem to dislike her. As a result I stay in school most of the day. It is very difficult because work at home too gets neglected but there is no other way.”

From the data mentioned in the table II it can be seen that only 25% of the schools have ramps on their grounds while 75% lack such basic amenities that are essential for children who are physically handicapped. The lack of such basic facilities, limit the access to schools for students with major physical disabilities. Mrs. Shama, mother of a 9 year old boy with multiple disabilities recalls her issues saying “We have many schools within the vicinity of our home, however I could not admit my son to any of them because they do not have provisions for taking a wheelchair through, and this is the only medium through which I can take him to different places, hence I have to travel 9-10 kms a day to the school which has a ramp.”

A major challenge faced by CWSN is toilet facilities available in schools. Often children with physical disabilities require special toilets and in the absence of the same face difficulty in using the existing ones. Based on the data presented above it can be clearly seen that none of the schools have provisions for special toilets for the physically handicapped. Mrs. Mohua mother of an 8 year old girl with cerebral palsy reported, "I go around break time to school every day just to help my child use the toilet. Since they do not have a special toilet it is very difficult. She has a locomotive disability and the older she gets the tougher it is for me to carry her."

According to the data provided in the table above, it can be seen that 56.25% of the schools have specific seating arrangements (including seating the student beside the teacher and seating the student in the front row) pertaining to CWSN. While 43.75% of the schools do not have any such provisions for CWSN.

Some students with disabilities are very often sensitive towards light. Certain lightings may not suit their liking and may trigger off a meltdown. However based on the data presented in the table above none of the schools (0%) have made provisions for specific lighting facilities in their schools.

Behavioral issues are common among CWSN. They tend to be hyper active, aggressive, anxious, nervous and even violent at times, hence having proper behavioral plans in place is mandatory not only for students with disabilities but also for those who share the environment with them. Mr. Gupta (name changed) primary school class teacher narrated the following "In my class there is a child who has major behavioral issues. He won't sit in one place, always runs about, and refuses to pay attention and starts screaming in between class. So when there is a severe breakdown and he refuses to calm down at all I have to separate the child from the other students and try to calm him down, in the event of things going out of hand I call for the parent. Generally the parents of these children wait in the school premises only, so calling them is not an issue." Having behavioral plans is essential because it not only secures the safety of the child with special needs, but also those in the environment of the child. Unfortunately based on the data found in the table above, it can be seen that none of the schools (0%) have behavioral management strategies set in place.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

- The model of partial inclusion has been implemented in the districts visited however there is a lack of coordination between teachers and special educators as a result of which no changes have been found in the classroom environment to fit in the needs of the disabled students which further results in the prevalence of the system of integration in the name of inclusion.
- Currently the lack of proper infrastructure can be seen as the biggest impediment to achieving the goal of inclusive education. Infrastructure is the means through which the ends can be achieved hence the lack of special toilets, ramps, seating arrangements, resources, special educators, trained teachers, behavioral plans and so on impedes the growth and development of children with special needs in mainstream schools.
- All participants reported behavioral issues among CWSN, yet none of the schools had a proper behavioral plan in place. Behavioral issues were found to be a major hindrance to all teachers who asserted that it prevented them from completing their lesson plans on time. Due to the lack of behavior management strategies, parents are asked to stay back in the school premises while the child attends the class and are even often asked to leave with the child or to not bring the child regularly to school due to the inability of the teachers in handling the child.
- The existing curriculum does not have any provisions which include the needs of the disabled students. Due to the existing impediments most CWSN attend school only twice or thrice a week.
- Head teachers have clearly stated that the funds allocated to the schools by the government is for the general development of the school, hence it becomes difficult to dedicate a part of the funds specifically for the needs for disabled students.
- Most of the teachers lack basic training in inclusive education. It has been found that trainings in inclusive education are conducted by the government once a year and for a very short duration of time as a result of which the teachers fail to grasp a proper understanding of inclusive education and its practices.

- There is a complete lack of knowledge on the Right to Education Act (2009) and Rights of Persons with disabilities Act (2016) among both teachers and parents which further leads to the failure in implementation of the provisions of these legislations.
- Lack of awareness and support continues to be a major problem in the districts. On one hand parents are not well informed on the rights their child is entitled to, sources of assistance available and forums through which aid can be acquired to ease their journey with their special child. While on the other hand ignorance on the part of schools, authorities and society in general, places families with special children at the brunt of mockery, stigmatization and avoidance which further impedes the development of inclusive education towards a positive end.

### **Discussion**

Almost two decades have passed since the introduction of inclusive education practices in our country, yet 100% implementation of this concept is still a far dream in many schools. There continues to prevail a wide margin between legislative provisions and actual practice. To begin with inclusion cannot be achieved until the curriculum followed in the schools is moderated to fit in the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Teachers must also be encouraged to maintain individualized education plans to keep pace with the learning abilities of students with special needs. This will further help determine the progress made by students with special needs in schools and aid the teachers in developing teaching methods and fostering a classroom environment that is viable for students with disabilities. Further official guidelines need to be provided to schools with regard to conducting of examination of CWSN. All formats including modification in the system, exemption from exams and techniques to be implemented to ensure progress in cases of exemption should be clearly specified for the convenience of the schools as well as CWSN. A lot is yet to be accomplished in the infrastructural section for achieving inclusivity in its truest sense. Funds should be allocated specifically to ensure that every school has a ramp, at least one special toilet, proper seating and lighting arrangements, a special educator, proper behavioral management strategies, attendants to supervise CWSN within the school premises, enough resource materials and other amenities as required to create an environment that is welcoming of CWSN. A strong loop of feedback also needs to be established between special educators, teachers and parents to ensure the overall development of CWSN in a mainstream school environment.

Strict vigilance should also be maintained to ensure that inclusive education trainings are held on a regular basis and proper measures should be applied to ensure awareness among teachers, parents and community members to foster a culture of inclusivity and combat any form of stigmatization against CWSN and their families. Thus more efforts and initiatives need to be directed towards the successful achievement of inclusive education for children across the country, since right to Education is a fundamental right it is important to ensure that every child has access to an environment that ensures a complete realization of that right.

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