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A Study of Children with Disabilities' Transition from Home into Inclusive Schools and Student-Teacher Relationship

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Abstract

Research has indicated inclusive schools are the cornerstones to reducing and eliminating discrimination among the different social and economic hierarchies in a society. The objective of inclusion is to develop a unified school system that can serve all sorts of people together (Lipsky & Garter, 1998). (Thousand et. al., 2007) emphasize, “Quality inclusion is not merely determined by student placement, but rather is based on creating an environment that supports and includes all learners”. Teachers play a significant role in the lives of children, and the influence of teachers increases with the increasing amount of time children spend in formal education settings (Baker et al., 2008; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Silver et al., 2010). Researches (Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Zhang and Sun, 2011) indicate that teachers also provide, like parents, similar emotional support and guidance to young children during their early years of schooling.

This study focused on children with disabilities' (CWD) inclusive schooling experiences through the lens of parents: quality over the transition from home into school and the strengths and difficulties faced by children with disabilities (CWD), their parents, and the teachers in government schools of Delhi. The sample for the study consisted of children with disabilities who were categorized as children with mental health problems and had varying disabilities. Hence, the study sample consisted of children with visual impairment (VI), low-vision (LV), orthopedically handicapped (OH), hearing impaired (HI), and mental retardation (MR). It is a qualitative study

using the narrative approach. Findings of the study indicate that teachers have a careless and negligent attitude towards CWD, and the transition of CWD from home into inclusive schools is fraught with challenges.

Keywords: children with disabilities (CWD), special education teachers (SETt), inclusive schools, transition of CWD, student-teacher relationship

Background of the Study

The philosophy of inclusion is a paradigm shift from earlier segregation of people with disabilities to one of integration and now inclusion. It may be difficult to trace its evolution across nations; however, now inclusive education is the forte of all member nations of the United Nations, globally. In the Indian context, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 heralded the paramount mandate of inclusive education for all its children in the age group of 06-14 years. The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has contextualized the education of all its children from ages 03-14 years under the mandate of the State, who shall be responsible for the quality education of this age group.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) has classified disability into: hearing, visual, speech, mental, and locomotor for understanding disability and health (Ustun Et al., 2003). As per Census data (2011), India has a population of 1.23 billion, and about 2.1 percent (over 21 million people) suffer from disability of a kind. Out of this, the total disabled population of males stands at 12.6 million, and females are placed at 9.3 million. In India, the “prevalence of disability” based “on secondary data analysis” of National Family and Health Survey -5 (NFHS, 2019-21) was 4.52 percent (www.frontiers.org/articles). In India, the most

common form of disability is locomotor disability (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc), which accounts for 44.70 percent of all disabilities followed by mental and speech disabilities.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

People with disabilities have poorer academic outcomes, low employment rates, and face a host of challenges from society. Societal taboos are highly prevalent too. Inclusive schools are promoted with the idea of creating a just and inclusive society. The percentage of the disabled population in India as per the 2011 census stood at 2.21%, an increase from 2.13% in 2001 (www.ccdisabilities.nic.in). India has a well-articulated policy on the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular mainstream schools. The RTE Act, 2009 has mandated the inclusion of CWD into the regular schools. The 8th edition of All India School Education Survey (AISES, [NCERT], 2016) places the statistics for children with disabilities at 835,287 for differently-abled students enrolled in 55,574 schools which comprise 22,192 (39.93%) primary, 10,730 (19.30%) upper primary, 16,054 (28.89%) secondary, and 6,598 (11.87%) higher secondary schools (<https://ncert.nic.in>). The number of physically or mentally challenged children who are dropouts is a cause for concern. Of the total, 34.12% (988,359) were out-of-school. All-round decline has been witnessed in the number of CWD dropping out. However, the same phenomenon was not observed as far as out-of-school disabled children are concerned. For example, in 2005, out-of-school disabled children stood at 34.19%, which remained at 34.12% in 2009. (Sub-group report for the XII Plan, Elementary Education, [Erstwhile HMRD] now Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2011).

Hence, a study was conducted to understand, through the lens of parents of children with disabilities (CWD), the transition of CWD into inclusive schools and the teacher-student

relationship in fully-funded government schools under the Directorate of Education, in the capital city of India, Delhi.

Definition of Key Terms

- Student-teacher relationship: In this study, it is the interaction and academic engagement of CWD and their classroom teachers and special education teachers who are responsible for managing and coordinating the affairs of CWD in regular/inclusive schools.

- Children with disabilities (CWD): In this study, the definition given by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), children with disabilities (CWD) “include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis”.

- Inclusive education: UNESCO’s definition of “inclusive education” as “a process of addressing and responding to the needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion and from within education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the state to educate all children”.

Research Questions

1. What is the schooling experience of Children with Disabilities (CWD) in inclusive schools of Delhi?

2. Do CWD experience student-teacher conflicts which, in turn, lead to more emotional and mental health problems?

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the transition experiences from home into school of children with disabilities in inclusive schools
2. To study the challenges faced by CWD, parents of CWD and teachers in their inclusive school education experience

Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature using a descriptive design with a narrative approach.

Population

All fully -funded government schools, teachers, special education teachers, children with disabilities and their parents under the Directorate of Education, Delhi consisted the population of the study.

Sample and Sampling

Sample consisted of 7 fully-funded government schools of Delhi from Central and South-East district of Delhi. The districts were chosen on the basis of convenience sampling as inclusive education is mandated by the Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009. Hence, inclusive education is the forte for all schools to be followed irrespective of location. From each district, educational zones were selected on purposive basis from the list of students with disabilities, zone-wise, available and maintained with Inclusive Education of Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS), New

Delhi. Hence, from each district two zones which had a significant presence of CWD in schools (at least 5-6 CWD enrolled and present in school) situated within such zones were considered for the study. From each school the special education teacher (SET) and two general education teachers in whose classrooms CWD were a part of the schooling process constituted the sample of the study. Parents of CWD were selected on basis of purposive sampling as only those parents whose children with disabilities were part of the study were contacted by researcher with teachers being the “gate-keepers” (Silverman, 2013) who provided the data regarding selection and availability of parents. The following formed the description of the sample as given in Table 01.

Table 1

Description of Sample

Sl. No.	District (s)	Zone	Sample	Total N
1.	South-East district of Dehi	School I	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (2), CWD (02), parents (2), one classroom observation only (about 30 minutes approx..)	N= SET (07), general teachers- 12, parents of CWD – 11, CWD- 14
		School II	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (2), CWD (02), parents (01)	
		School III	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (01), CWD (02), parents (2)	
2.	Central district of Delhi	School I	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (01), CWD (02), parents (01)	
		School II	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (2), CWD (02), parents (2)	
		School III	Special -education teacher (SET-1). General teachers (02), CWD (02), parents (2)	

School IV Special -education teacher (SET-1).
General teachers (2), CWD (02),
parents (01)

N = 7 (fully -Funded Government schools)

Tools and Techniques used in the study and Procedure of Study

The general education teachers were given a Questionnaire and interviews were conducted with special education teachers in the first stage. After analysis of interview responses, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with special education teachers to gain a greater depth-of-understanding regarding the educational experiences of CWD in inclusive schools. 2 FGDs were held zone wise at the monthly meetings of special education teachers. The researcher could also observe only one classroom due to permission and time constraints. The classroom which was observed had the presence of (02) two orthopaedically handicapped CWD. The researcher contacted for interviews and FGD, the parents and CWD for data collection at the distribution camps for (03) CWD who were OH category and [(02-LV): the data for 04 CWD in total were from low vision (LV) category], 02 CWD belonged to hearing impaired (HI) category and 03 were certified as multiple disabilities (MD): having the presence of more than one disability as per the Rights of Persons with Disability (RPWD) Act, 2016. Rest of the interviews and FGDs was gathered from two more sites apart from the aid distribution camp site: at homes of CWD and in schools at school closure time. The (3) FGDs with CWD was held for about 15-20 minutes each in 3 different sites at : (a) aid distribution camp (03 -OH CWD and 02 -LV CWD comprised the participants of FGD along with the presence of their parents and the two (02) special education teachers of respective schools who accompanied the CWD to the aid distribution camp for devices (b) home vicinity of CWD - (02 – LV CWD and 01- HI child with disability with 3 participants in presence of parents and (c) FGD was held at school premises when parents had come to fetch their CWD after school (03) CWD – MD, in the presence of parents and class teacher.

The dimensions of the tool for understanding the inclusive schooling experience of CWD included: peer relationship, transition and emotional-bond formation needs, background of children, self-esteem needs, social behaviour/ interaction. The dimensions were taken after an analysis of a review of literature.

Ethical Considerations

The data was collected after observing proper ethical considerations. The principal of each school was informed about the nature of study and permission for access was sought. The sample was informed regarding the purpose of data collection and the nature of the study involved. In a few schools, teachers acted as “gate-keepers” (Silverman, 2013) and this helped the researcher to gain access to the schools and Principals. Confidentiality was observed and triangulation was carried out through FGD with parents and teachers both, after the interview phase to cross -check the evidence as part of the inclusive schooling experiences of children with disabilities. The consent of parents and teachers were taken as consent of children with disabilities.

Analysis of the data

Based on the analysis of the responses of general classroom teachers, special educators and parents of children with disabilities and CWD collected through the questionnaire, interview schedules, Focus-group discussion and classroom observation the following themes emerged related to the two objectives of the study. The responses of the sample have been clubbed together following the narrative approach. The researcher used Thematic Analysis to analyses and interpret the data.

Findings and Discussion

Transition experiences from home into school of children with disabilities in inclusive schools

Social Behaviour /Interaction and Peer Relationship

The teachers' responses indicated that teachers do encourage the children to interact with each other and make them sit and play together, form groups etc. However, teachers expressed that peer interaction with CWD and the regular children *"do not happen as they should"*.

The children with disabilities expressed that "few students are good to us but few make fun of us and call us "mental", "mad", "lame etc.

The parents responded that "schools are still not welcoming children with disabilities like they welcome the "other" children.

Developing Positive Relationship/ Forging a Bond

The teachers expressed that "as a philosophy inclusive education is very good" but "as a practice it is difficult to implement" due to academic limitations and teachers are also not trained in different disabilities "which makes the task of classroom interaction / engagement with teaching-learning difficult".

The parents expressed that *"kuch bachchje madad karte ..kuch matlab nahin rakhte.....(some students help CWD and some are aloof to them)"*.

The CWD expressed that *"kuchh bachche achche hainhum chips, biscuits khabhi mil ke khate .. kuch hamare mazak udhate.... (some are good and friendly us, we eat and share chips, biscuits with them and some make fun of us)"*.

Classroom Observation

The clubbed responses of the teachers and parents indicated that real inclusive education for children with disabilities is yet to happen. Few rudimentary initiatives like ramps, infrastructure for disabled -friendly toilets have been initiated but proper social and academic inclusion is yet to happen. Through informal conversation with the classroom teachers in whose classes children with special needs were a part of the above was revealed.

Challenges faced by parents of CWD and teachers in the inclusive school education experience of children with disabilities

Background of the Children

Challenges faced by teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers)

Findings of the study reveal that both kinds of teachers: special education teachers (SETs) and general classroom teachers who engage with CWD struggle in understanding the background of the child.

Teachers are faced with the challenge of “not knowing the history of children with disabilities... in case of any emergency the whereabouts of their prior health history and problems are not knownthis creates a fear and confusion over uncertainty to deal with the child’s disability “. Teachers’ reported that “with children having mental problems the challenge is double-fold.. they do not know the predictive behaviour of such children and also how to deal if such behaviour occurs”. On being probed further the teachers mentioned “CWD can stay in schools till the age of 18 years.... Some children with disabilities grow physically and are difficult to be restrained in their actions during behaviour problems”. Teachers also highlighted that “most

of the CWD in the government schools come from weak financial backgrounds and with poor or little attention to school rules and regulations....even though free books and uniform etc, are provided by schools (government provision)... CWD still stand out and apart from the rest of non-disabled peers due to their non-adaptive behaviour ...not wearing proper uniform, no academic work done in copies, sheets etc.

Challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities

Regarding parents, the findings revealed that

“teacher kehte school mein waqt zaya kyon karte..... bache pe dhyan nahin dete.... Mazak banate.....(teachers do not take care of our child and embarrass them...say “cannot study ..why waste time in school here?”)

Challenges faced by children with disabilities

The interview and FGD responses of CWD indicated that they liked going to schools but few students were hostile to them. They reported that teachers liked them and they sit in classrooms. They also reported that *“during games and tiffin breaks they do not get to play”*. When probed *“What would they like to change in their school?”* The CWD reported that they also wished to “engage in games and sports” which indicated that access to sports and games was not available to them.

Student-teacher conflicts

The clubbed responses indicated that student -teacher conflicts occur as a part of the academic engagement. General classroom teachers face difficulty in planning academic -oriented outcome for CWD.

Teachers feel, “it is time-consuming” and “unsure about the learning which has occurred in the child”. Teachers’ responses also revealed “one is at a loss to predict the kind of curriculum that should be planned for such children and how to engage such children in classes is challenging”. It was surprising that few teachers also mentioned that “usually CWD are not academically-sound and no responsibility for learning can be fixed on them due to their mental and state of being”.

This finding indeed is not surprising as it may be interpreted that teachers have the hegemony of power in classrooms and Gramsci has mentioned of the “common-sense” approach of theory of Subaltern Consciousness in Hegemony’s processes. This is reflected through the teachers’ responses and the common sense” about learning that CWD cannot learn as it is their genetic fault. Teachers fail to owe up their responsibility to teach CWD and make them a part of their social classroom.

Challenges faced by parents

This is reflected in the responses of parents who reported

“teacher bacche ko dhyaan nahin deta, pyar se baat bhi nahin karta.... Hamara bacha class main kuch bhi nahin karta.. .. doosre bache bhi majak karte.... Waqt barbaad hota hai.. humare bache ki”. (teachers do not engage our children.....do not love/ support/ care for them.... Our children are not engaged in classwork/ class activities... other children in class make fun of our children....our children just while away time”

Apart from the challenge of teachers not academically engaging CWD, parents when probed “as what do you do when your children report the misbehaviour that happens to them”.

The parents reported that

“school mein bacche jaate hain (our CWD kids at least go to school)... varna yeh kahan jayenge

(what else can they do?).. ghar se yahi behtaar haai (implied...going to school is better than staying at home),,,, teachger ke nazroon ke saamne hain (teachers are there to look after them... ghar mein koi dhyan nahin de pata (at home no one is there to look after them))”.

These are working parents and mostly do regular household chores and run small time-grocery stores. This implies that CWD are not attended to by parents at home and in fact schools are also not inclusive- friendly to engage CWD in the best manner.

Responses of Special Education Teachers (SETs)

Regarding responses of special education teacher it is worth narrating that

“as special education teachers we have to fill -up more forms than doing actual teaching-learning ...or planning for Individual Education Plans (IEPs).....most of the special education teachers have to spend time on the portal for children with special needs” .

Few special education teachers also reported *“even if IEP’s with short-term objectives are planned... it is difficult to implement in classrooms as resources are limited in schools and procuring them from each district headquarters is difficult and infused with red-tapism”.*

Teacher-parent Conflicts

Parents reported that

“madam sab humein izzat nahin dete... sochhte hum bachcho ko paise ke vaaste school bhejte...account mein paise banaane ke liye...(teachers do not value us during PTM and also whenever we visit schools as teachers embarrass us thinking we come only for the money given to our disabled child through bank accounts)”.

When probed further to parents to understand if teachers explicitly implied that parents are only interested in the money given to CWD for their specific needs, parents responded:

“hum yeh samaj jatae.. teacher humaire bare kya ssoch te (we can make out what teachers think about us)... schhol jjana humein pasand nahin (we do not look forward to visiting schools)... waqt bhi nahin milta (we are hard-pressed for time).. teacher beetha ke rakhte humein (we have long waiting periods before we meet teachers”

All this indicated that parents of CWD did not prefer visiting schools even during PTMs (parent-Teacher Meetings).

In contrast, the findings related to teacher-parent conflicts from the teachers' responses indicated *“parents do not come during scheduled times of PTMs or appointment which makes it difficult to collaborate with parents on academic planning or holistic development of CWD”*.

Teachers also reported that

“CWD need parental care and attention at home more than in school as majority of the times they are at home”. Teachers were also of the view that *“in school we take care of different children including CWD and parents look after only their own children at homes so parents should focus on their children at homes better for their growth and future”*.

This implied that ownership of CWD and their better future is on the parents of CWD rather than on schools or external agencies of disabled organizations. Government has provisions and schemes for CWD and many disabled organizations are advocating and working for CWD. But such awareness measures need to be made to parents of CWD and their siblings.

Parents also reported

“teacher humare bachche ke saath hamdardi se pesh aaye ..ya na ki hamesha use hi kusoorvar mmane....(we want teachers to treat our child with love and respect and have

patience)” and mentioned “Ghar par humere bacchha aisa bilkul nahin karta... kissi se laarta bhi nahin” (*Our child does not behave in an appropriate way as mentioned by teachers*). (*they do not quarrel with anyone at home*).

The above responses indicated that there is also a lack of parent-teacher trust in the inclusive learning environment and blame -game runs supreme in the educational experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive schools. In a nutshell, the CWD are at crossroads in inclusive schools due to the lack of understanding on part of parents and teachers.

Conclusion

Early intervention and prevention strategies which focus on building high-quality student-teacher relationship during children’s transition into formal schooling may help reduce rates of childhood emotional and mental health problems during early school years. Research indicates the impact of teachers’ relationship with children especially at critical developmental periods as “salient” (Silver et. al. 2010); Moore (2008 cited by Lewis et. al. 2017); Silver 2005) states that transition from preschool to formal schooling is one such critical period in the life of a child as this is “a time of new academic challenges in a more structured learning environment” and involves “complex changes” in “children’s roles, responsibilities and relationships. A crucial step in “children’s successful adaptation to the school environment” is “caring and supportive student-teacher relationships” (Birch and Ladd, 19997; Myers and Pianta, 2008 Cited by Lewis et. al., 2017). Hence, the underlying significance of a supportive and smooth transition for children with disabilities into inclusive schools is paramount for positive educational experiences for children with disabilities and their parents.

Implications of the Study

- Teachers to be more understanding towards children with disabilities
- Teachers to value CWD and appreciate and encourage them at whatever value-addition they bring to the classroom
- Teachers and non-disabled peers become more aware of the diversity of population in a global world and can seek out ways to reach out to CWD
- Teachers and peer support is essential to make inclusive education a reality and create inclusive-learner friendly environments for CWD

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