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Social inclusion of children with visual impairment

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ABSTRACT

Initiatives taken by several organizations working for children with Disability and governments across the globe have set the stage for the inclusion of Children with Disability in mainstream schools. In India also, Rights of People with Disability are well guarded by constitutional policies, they are provided with several provisions and supports by the government to guard their interests. Statistics show a rise in their participation in schools and workplace in last two decades. With all these positive signs of inclusion, there is one more aspect that is Social Inclusion. The present paper explores the impact of inclusion in schools on social inclusion of Children with Visual Impairment (CwVI) in society at large. Paper also discusses changing the role of special schools and organizations from study centers to resource centers in the present era of inclusion. Data is collected by focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews with 30 CwVI studying in 9 Inclusive schools in Delhi and NCR and 20 teachers teaching in 7 Organizations for Blind in North India. Findings reveal that inclusion of CwVI in mainstream schools has positive impacts on Children with visual Impairment but at the same time, many incidents clearly show signs of social exclusion in these inclusive setups.

Keywords: Children with Visual Impairment (CwVI), Social Inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of Student and Young people with Disabilities has become the norm in present classrooms and workplaces. Due to RTE (Right to Education) Act, Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, and RPWD (Right to Person with Disability) Act, Student and Young people with Disability are getting equal opportunities and status in the society. Their enrolment in school, colleges have increased and so does their participation in the workplace. Review of literature validates the importance of social interaction and participation on the psychological, cognitive and personality development of Persons with Visual Impairment. Researchers also emphasize the development of social skills for better acceptance of Persons with Visual Impairment in society. Kolb & Henley-Maxwell (2003) concluded the early development of social skills promotes psychological well-being, resilience, and mental health. U. Megha (2015) analyzed various theories to develop a theoretical framework to explain, predict and understand various interrelated aspects of the phenomena of socialization of visually impaired students for their inclusion that had helped to connect to the existing knowledge in the related areas and to support in prescribing future solutions. The theoretical analysis supports the socialization and inclusion override the physical impairment and social skills can be developed in students with visual impairment that further lead to developing their personality and sense of self.

Researches also indicate the importance of inclusive education for social inclusion of CwVI in society. Torreno Stephani (2012) states that social deficits in children with visual impairment are typically caused by a lack of information about the visual aspects of interacting with others. S.R. Victor (2007) purposed that the education of both the self and society are essential for positive adjustment. S.K. Angra & G.V. Murthy (1997) found blindness has many social implications. There is a loss of productivity, the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, depressive manifestations, loss of self-esteem and most patients lead an isolated humiliating life. Negative impacts of social exclusion on well-being of Person with Visual Impairment.

Until now education of Children with Disabilities was confined to Special schools. Now, when they are becoming part of mainstream schools, the question arises are they accepted well by their peers, teachers, parents of their peers, school management and other stakeholders of society. Is their presence has affected their perceptions, attitude, and understanding towards them? Do they still face some sort of exclusion in the inclusive setups of society? Has the role of Special schools changed in the present scenario, from Study Centres to Resource Centres? In the present study, the researcher aims to explore answers to above questions in the context of Person with Visual Impairment.

Definition of visual impairment as per RPWD Act, 2016.

Visual Impairment -

- a) "blindness" means a condition where a person has any of the following conditions, after best correction –
 - i. The total absence of sight; or
 - ii. Visual acuity less than 3/60 or less than 10/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with best possible correction; or
 - iii. Limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of fewer than 10 degrees.
- b) "low vision" means a condition where a person has any of the following conditions, namely: -
 - i. Visual acuity not exceeding 6/18 or less than 20/60 up to 3/60 or up to 10/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with best possible corrections; or
 - ii. Limitations of the field of vision subtending an angle of fewer than 40 degrees up to 10 degrees.

2. OBJECTIVES

- Role of special schools and organizations for blind in preparing Children with Visual Impairment, their parents and mainstream schools for the inclusion of CwVI in social setup.
- Providing accounts of the lived experiences of CwVI studying in Inclusive Settings.
- Examining the educational inclusion movement in terms of social movement of change.

3. METHODOLOGY

Focus Group Discussion and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 CwVI studying in inclusive schools in Delhi and NCR. And 20 teachers teaching Children with Visual Impairment in 7 organizations for the blind in North India.

Findings: Research findings are based on lived experiences of Children with Visual Impairment. However, names of participants are changed for the presentation of findings of interviews and focus group discussions. Experiences of students and teachers reveal the positive impact of inclusion in mainstream schools on the overall development of CwVI. Results of interview and focus group discussion are discussed below....

Together we learn better

CwVI studying in inclusive set up was found to be more vocal than CwVI studying in special schools. They were found to have an opinion on social issues. They question their parents and teachers about their rights. They were found to be aware of facilities and provisions available to them by the government.

According to CwVI interviewed, they have sighted friends with whom they share their lunch and jokes. Their sighted friends share their experiences with them when they visit adventure parks or some tourist spots, they discuss recent movies watched, their favorite celebrities, new technology etc.

Rainbow was never topic of excitement for Raghav when he was in special school. But here in the new school he also waits for the rainbow after rains, as he shares the joy and laughter of his classmates when they shout in happiness after watching rainbow in the sky.

Sighted students studying with CwVI are found to be more empathetic towards them. They understand their needs and limitations better.

According to teachers interviewed, found students studying in inclusive schools from a young age are more comfortable in school settings than who join schools in a later stage. They share a good rapport with their classmates and they have devised their own adjustment strategies with time.

Teachers teaching in special school feels that inclusion positively influences psychological well-being of CwVI. Earlier teachers used to counsel CWVI very often but now they feel frequency is reduced. Teachers find them more confident and happy.

Students training in life skills, mobility training, training in using a computer and reading the writing in braille has made them more independent and this helps in their adjustment in mainstream schools.

Teachers teaching in a special school for 20 years or so, says due to technological intervention and sense of competition developed in CwVI in inclusive set up has overall improved their academic graph. Now they are opting for science and other practical subjects also. They are more specific about their goals in life.

Social inclusion is the most difficult part of Inclusion

Lack of Awareness: Komal and Aarti both are 5 years old blind girls. They stay in a residential special school run by an NGO. Komal is a complete chatterbox when I shook hand with her, she curiously explored my watch, ring, clothes etc. and asked lots of question; while Aarti hardly spoke a word, she appeared to be dull and it looked like as if she has some sort of cognitive impairment. When I shared my concern with the caretaker she informed Aarti has good IQ, she very promptly responds to instructions. But she likes to remain alone, she never complains or asks for anything, she does not play or communicate with her peers. Reason for her aloofness lies in the way she was brought up by her parents, before coming to special school. Aarti's parents both work as laborers at a construction site. Aarti's mother used to take her to a construction site along with her, she was always placed in a safe corner, from where her mother could keep a watch on her. Aartis parents love her, but they are not aware of strategies or methods required for the effective upbringing of the child with visual impairment. They do not know how they can make her aware of the world around her in the absence of sight. Aarti's mother who used to work for 9 hours at a construction site and later at home hardly gets any time to interact or teach her anything. Given the physical limitation incidental learning was not possible for Aarti. Properly communicated words of parents and other family members are the only sources of social interface and

cognitive development for the child with blindness in the primitive years of life. In the absence of this meaningful communication, the world remains a dark blank space, cluttered with some voices that do not make any sense for them, as in case of Aarti. Words and tactile exposure are the two primary source of gaining awareness about the world around for Person with Visual Impairment (PwVI). When Aarti was devoid of these experiences it negatively affected her cognitive, personality and social development. Parents, sibling, peers, teachers, caretakers are all social threads that together interweave the network of development of any child including children with Disability.

Lack of awareness, negative attitudes of parents, teachers, and peers are among the most common factors of social exclusion.

Social isolation in the inclusive setup: Raghav, a student of class 6 in an inclusive school, learns a lot from experiences shared by his sighted peers. His peers take care of him, they include him in class activities and always help him whenever he asks. But nobody invites him to their birthday parties because their parents are not comfortable with the thought of having a blind child in the party. He is always excluded from science practicals, class picnics, outstation trips etc.

Negative Attitude: Mr. Kumar, a science teacher in a reputed private school feels it's not fair to burden a regular teacher with the responsibility of Student with Visual Impairment when they already have special schools and well trained special teachers.

Insensitivity: Aman managed to get admission in a reputed college of Psychology after doing 12th from a special school. His peers are cooperative, nobody ever misbehaved with him. During teacher 's lecture, his peers do not care to maintain complete silence in the classroom. Since audiobooks and tactile books are yet not available for all university curriculum, teacher's lecture is the only source of learning the course content for Aman. His peer's insensitivity towards his learning needs affects his relationship with his peers.

Administrative Hassles: Kritika, Sri Kant Bolla, Kartic Sawney all had to fight legal battles with CBSE, IITs and Medical colleges to get admission, as their administration believed blind people are not suitable to study science and engineering courses.

Lack of Proper Career Counselling: Mahendra,(8% vision) got admission in an integrated course of B. Sc, B. Ed after clearing entrance with merit. During final practical exams, he was asked to submit practical manual complete with all 43 diagrams in the syllabus of Botany and Zoology. When pleaded to exempt him from drawing the diagrams as he was unable to draw them owing to his impairment. The teacher questioned him, what exemption he will seek from young students whom he will be teaching once he will complete his degree in B. Sc, B. Ed. Mahendra's case is clear case of lacuna in policy intervention and lack of provision of proper counseling before admission to professional courses.

Experience of Aarti, Raghav and other students with Visual Impairment raises the question of social acceptance, awareness of their needs and the true inclusion of these people in our Indian society. Education is most important but inclusion in educational setup will not be successful without social inclusion. Real inclusion is impossible without society being insensitive towards needs of Person with Disability in social settings. Researcher felt the need to explore reasons behind the exclusion of PwVI in inclusive setups.

Role of Special Schools in the Era of Inclusive Education

Special schools play a major role in education and overall development of Children with Disability. Though the role of special schools has changed in present era of inclusion, still, they are found to be at the axis of education for CwVI. Now they are empowered more as the resource center rather than as the study center. Though some special schools are still taking the charge of the overall education of CwVI, present paper focuses on changing role played by special schools in the present scenario when admitting Students with Disability in a mainstream school is emphasized by the government, educationists, and parents alike. The role played by special schools in the present scenario of inclusive education is discussed below:

- Students studying in inclusive schools are provided with remedial classes in the evening by special schools.
- Train students in basic life skills and mobility skills.
- Train students in reading and writing through Braille and computers.
- Train students in using assistive tools. These days students use a Light probe, color probe etc. to perform science experiments. Students are trained in using them beforehand in the resource center so that he/she can perform experiment along with the whole class.
- Train students to use their other senses efficiently to compensate for the loss of vision. Students are taught how they could identify chemical changes by using senses of touch (in case of exothermic reactions), by using the sense of smell (if gas is evolved), and sense of hearing (counting drops falling on a hard surface).
- Teachers from special schools are often invited to train mainstream teachers. Special teachers enrich regular teachers by sharing their experiences with CwVI. They help regular teachers to understand CwVI's psychology and learning styles.
- Teachers from special schools also participate in the development of study materials (tactile books) for CwVI.
- Special schools provide study material (braille books) and other resources to regular schools if and when required. Like tactile globe and diagrams prepared by teachers in special schools.
- Since special schools are equipped with technology and machines required for teaching-learning of CwVI, they often provide technical assistance to regular schools. Like printing test papers for internal exams in braille printing press or braille photostat machine.
- Special schools also provide timely counseling and training to parents.

Most importantly teachers at the special school understand their psychology and need better, they are still the main emotional support for their students. They could diagnose if the child is facing problem in studies or disturbed due to ill-treatment or insensitive remark by someone at school and provide necessary counseling or solution to the child.

4. CONCLUSION

With inclusion in the education sector, social inclusion is also gaining ground. It has improved the way in which society perceives and treats CwVI. It will influence the fundamental nature of the society towards disability in the long run. But in current scenario we have only come halfway, CwVI still encounters the incidents of ill-treatment, discrimination, and social exclusion in schools. With collaboration with special schools and parents, mainstream schools can help in achieving real inclusion of CwVI in society.

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