

Infrastructural impediments faced by Children with Special Needs in Primary Government Schools

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Abstract

Education is a basic right of children across the globe. In India the Right to Education became a fundamental right under Article 21A of the constitution with the emergence of the 86th amendment in 2002. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) developed between 2000-2001 aims towards the achievement of Universal Elementary Education with the objective of providing equal opportunities to all children in the sphere of education. While the Right to Education has been clearly established across the country, the accessibility to this right remains a question mark for certain children in India. The focus of this paper is on the accessibility to various governmental educational institutions by students with disabilities. The Right to Education Act (2009) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) provide for measures to ensure zero discrimination to students with disabilities and measures to ensure the accessibility of education to all children. Yet UNESCO reports in 2019 state that 75% of children with disabilities do not attend schools in India. A major cause behind such statistics is the lack of conducive infrastructure for children with special needs. While schools are available they still aren't accessible to students with disabilities and this poses as a major challenge to the educational system of our country. Hence the aim of this paper is to understand the existing infrastructural impediments in the primary schools of West Bengal. A mixed method approach was utilized to execute this study, while structured interview schedules and in-depth interview guides aided in obtaining the data required to understand the current situation for students with disabilities and provide solutions to amend the same.

Keywords: *Children with special needs (CWSN), students with disabilities, Right to education*

I. Introduction

From the beginning education has always played a prominent role in India. The makers of the constitution included education under Article 45 of the Directive principles of state policy making education free and compulsory for all children till the age of fourteen years. After almost half a century into the independence of India,

the Right to Education received the status of a fundamental right under Article 21 A of the constitution with the implementation of the 86th amendment of 2002. While education is one of the most basic rights every child is entitled to, it is the students with special needs who are often denied access to this right. Children with special needs are those children who have certain mental or physical disabilities or both, as a result of which specific requirements are needed in the environment that surrounds them, in order to help them function to the best of their abilities. While schools are available, infrastructural deficits in most schools make them inaccessible to students with special needs.

The UNCRPD (Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities) which was established in December 2006, was ratified by India in October 2007 (UN, DESA, n.d). The provisions of this convention clearly stated the need for inclusion to be adopted at all levels of education without any discrimination against persons with disabilities. In a typical inclusive educational setup the environment of the educational institution is modified and made conducive to the needs of persons with disabilities. While in an integrated educational set up, students with disabilities attend classes at the educational institution, however no changes are made in the environment of the institute which is conducive to the needs of the child. This system of integration was followed in India for the education of Persons with disabilities for several decades. Attempts towards integration began with the Kothari commission of 1964, to The Integrated education for disabled children scheme of 1974, and the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995. While the right to education was in place, the right to education of persons with disabilities remained neglected. Gradually with the emergence of the 21st century, the establishment of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the ratification of the UNCRPD, Inclusive education in India began to gain the prominence it deserved.

The inclusive education of disabled at the secondary stage (IEDSS) emerged in 2009-2010 drawing focus upon encouraging education of persons with disabilities at the secondary level of education (MHRD, Government of India, n.d). In the same year the Right to free and compulsory Education Act (2009) emerged which was amended in the year 2012 to include Children with special needs within its arena.

The RTE now remains an important legislation that furthers the cause towards inclusion. In 2016 The Rights of Persons with disabilities Act (RPWD) was established, section 102 of this Act replaces the current Act with the old RPWD legislation that had come into force in 1995. This Act replaces the word integration (as mentioned in the previous Act) with Inclusion and clearly specifies for changes that educational institutes need to adopt in order to create an inclusive environment for children with special needs. Chapter III of the Act lays down the provisions for inclusion including, various infrastructural modifications that lays the foundations to successful inclusion.

The age of 5 is the regular age at which children in India can enroll into educational institutions. Yet according to a joint report by UNESCO and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) 75% of 5 year olds with disabilities do not attend schools in India while one in four in the 5 to 19 year old group have not enrolled in an educational institute. (The Financial Express, 2019) Based of the census as updated in 2016, 2.86 cr people in India are disabled, 35.29% of all persons living with disabilities are children while the number of disabled persons are highest between the age group of 10-19 years of age i.e. 46.2lakhs. The age group within which the highest number of disabled persons are found is also the age group at which education is most crucial for children. Which requires schools to ensure rapid modifications in order to create a healthy and safe learning environment that encourages and supports the needs of students with disabilities as well. Even though over a decade has passed since the emergence of the need for inclusive practices in India, most children with disabilities remain out of school and are denied of basic elementary education due to the lack of appropriate infrastructure and modifications within the school environment. Hence while education is available, its accessibility still remains unavailable to students with special needs across the country. Hence this research study aims to understand the different types of infrastructural impediments that exist, and provide solutions to ensure that schools adopt inclusive practices whole heartedly for the benefit of children with special needs.

II. Literature Review

Over the years several research studies have been conducted with regard to the education of students with special needs that have indicated the challenges that result due to the existence of inappropriate infrastructure. Research studies indicate that India is a country in transition, that India still lacks efficient inclusive education practices, and the access to certain amenities are still highly expensive in nature **Kohama(2012)** In another study that focused on the attitude of teachers towards inclusive education, it was found that several teachers were dissatisfied with the government's policies and the prevailing infrastructural facilities for CWSN **Belapurkar&Phatak (2012)**. A study conducted in 2013 observed that 70% of the teachers teaching CWSN lacked support in the classroom which made it difficult for them to conduct their lessons **Das, Kuyini, &Desai (2013)**. Studies also indicate that while government schools have annual health check ups to assess the physical health of the children, no psychologists are involved in schools for assessing the mental health of the children. Schools also lack the assistance of special educators and behavior management poses as a major impediment due to the lack of behavior management strategies **Raghavan (2014)**. In a study conducted in 2016 parents of CWSN expressed the struggles faced due to lack of appropriate infrastructural facilities in schools and parents also expressed the need for separate rooms in general schools for the convenience of CWSN **Saikia (2016)**.

The above mentioned studies are the just some of the many that have observed and determined the existing state of infrastructural facilities in government schools in India. The lack of trained teachers, ramps, access to psychologists, space, resource materials, special educators, assistive devices and more are some of the major barriers that continue to remain in the path to inclusion of CWSN.

III. Research Methodology

The aim of this paper was to understand the infrastructural barriers faced by children with special needs (CWSN) in government schools. The sequential mixed method approach was applied in the execution of this research study. This research was conducted with 20 primary government schools in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah, situated in the state of West Bengal. The samples were selected with the aid of purposive sampling. Structured interview schedules and in-depth interview guides were constructed and validated by experts for the collection data. The quantitative data was analyzed with the application of simple descriptive statistics with the assistance of SPSS while the qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis with the aid of Atlas ti software. Prior to the collection of data a pilot study was conducted with two primary government schools from the region of Rishra in the district of Hooghly.

IV. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This part of the paper takes into consideration the data collected from the sample of 20 schools in relation to the barriers in infrastructure faced by students with disabilities. The data once collected was analyzed with the help of SPSS and Atlas ti softwares.

Table 1 consists of the percentage of schools that provided/ did not provide particular infrastructural amenities for students with disabilities. Each provision will also be substantiated by the responses of the parents and teachers that were collected during the in-depth interviews. Participants of the qualitative responses will be termed as P1, P2 and so on, for the convenience of the reader.

Table 1: Responses to Infrastructural Impediments

NoSl.	Questions	Hooghly		Howrah		Total	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Provision of transportation facilities for CWSN	0	8	0	8	0%	100%
2	Availability of Para-Teachers to assist class teachers	2	6	2	6	25%	75%
3	Mental health assessments conducted	0	8	0	8	0%	100%
4	Behavior Management Strategies available	0	8	1	7	6.25%	93.75%
5	Presence of attendants to supervise CWSN within the	0	8	0	8	0%	100%

	school						
6	Access to a ramp in the school	3	5	1	7	25%	100%
7	Provision of specific seating arrangements in the classroom	5	3	4	4	44%	56%
8	Access to Special toilet for CWSN in the school	0	8	0	8	0%	100%
9	Training of teachers in Inclusive education	6	2	5	3	68.75%	31.25%

Chapter III of the Rights of Persons with disabilities Act (2016) Clearly states the need for the government to ensure that infrastructure is made accessible to persons with disabilities and also provides for the arrangement of transportation facilities for students with disabilities and their parents based of the severity of the disability. However based on the data provided in Table 1, it is clearly visible that several infrastructural barriers still prevail, denying students with disabilities the Right to access their fundamental right to Education.

The data found in Table 1 indicates the lack of transportation facilities for students with disabilities. None of the schools visited during this study had any form of provision for the transportation of CWSN to and from school. Due to the lack of transportation facilities many parents face challenges in taking their child with special needs to school. P1 mother of an 8 year old child on the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) responded to the urgent need for transportation with 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 it (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 hyperactive. So travelling in the train with him is very risky but I have to do it for him, I can’t just let him stay at home all day. Once he almost fell off the moving train, that is how tough it is for me, I have to be so careful with age it gets difficult for both of us.” Even though the RTE Act has made it mandatory for schools to be within 1 km of a child’s home, many parents choose to enroll their children with special needs to schools that are distant from their home because they desire a school with regular classes, a well functioning administration, helpful teachers and a reputed name. Hence lack of transportation makes it very difficult to access such schools. On the other hand for parents with children who have severe physical disabilities travelling for even a kilometer can be pose as a major challenge without the assistance of transport. Thus the lack of transportation is one of the major infrastructural barriers to accessing education.

Para-teachers are teachers who generally work towards assisting the class teacher, thereby making the work load easier. Even though the RTE Act demands for a 1:30 teacher student ratio, most classrooms were observed to be overpopulated and cramped. Based on the data provided in table 1, it can be seen that only 25% of the schools had para- teachers, while 75% did not provide any assistance to class teachers. Often students with disabilities, particularly those with ADHD are hyperactive in nature and find it difficult to remain seated in one place during the

class. They prefer walking around, running about, and may involve stimming activities which tends to disrupts the concentration of the entire class. In such situations both the teacher and the students remain at a disadvantaged. However the assistance of a trained para- teacher can prove to be valuable in ensuring that the teacher can complete the lesson while providing sole attention to the child with special needs. However it must also be noted that in such situations responsibilities must be shared and class teachers must not consider CWSN to be the sole responsibility of the para- teacher. Team work will ensure the success of such practices. P2 a class teacher from the district of Hooghly stated “I would say we need specially trained Para- teachers more to help us in class and handle the children with special needs. It will make immense difference to us. Often the disabled children get disturbing during class hours and that’s when our teaching time gets disrupted in order to see to them so having a specially trained teacher will be of great help.” Hence the assistance of Para-teachers could play a vital role in the education of students with special needs.

The Right to Persons with disabilities Act 2016 provides for the screening of children at a young age for the early detection of mental disorders. However none of the schools that participated in this study had provisions for psychological assistance. While physical health check-ups are conducted annually in government schools, there is still no provision for mental health assessment of the children. Often parents maybe unaware that there child may have a disability or a disorder and the provision of such screenings can aid in early detection and diagnosis of the child. While such a measure may seem difficult in implementation, adequate effort can ensure the mental and emotional well being of children across the country. P3 mother of a child with down syndrome, states “I knew my children looked different but I never knew it was a disorder until she joined school and started facing difficulties in coping and talking.”

While most teachers complained of behavior issues among students with special needs, it was surprising to discover that 93.75% of the schools visited did not have access to behavior management strategies. P4 A primary school teacher belonging to the district of Howrah mentioned that “It is very difficult to take classes at times because Raghav (name changed) is hyperactive. He makes different noises and runs around the class. The children find it amusing, but it is such a hindrance to me. Everything gets delayed.” While on one hand teachers find it challenging to have hyperactive students in class, P1, mother of an 8 year old with ASD stated the following “A teacher asked me to not bring my son to school regularly because he disrupts the flow of the class and she does not know how to handle him. They make me wait in school all day. On days when he gets disruptive, I am asked to take him home. I feel bad. My son is always left out because of his disorder. This is wrong.” Thus the lack of Behavior management strategies is a major barrier to enabling the proper education of students with special needs. It often results in the student being left out of most school activities. The 6.25% of the schools had self developed strategies involving the separation of the child from the rest of the class and the source causing hyperactivity or a meltdown to the child. In the event of the situation getting out of hand the parents are called to take over.

Children with special needs, particularly those with hyperactivity tend to wander around the school. If not supervised or tended to they can walk their way out of school and even get lost. P5 A teacher of a primary school stated “ Anil (name changed) always has the habit of walking out of the class and roaming about the school. We let him be since he is not mentally stable, however one day he walked out of school and when his mother turned to pick him up in the afternoon , he could not be found. Finally with the help of the locals he was found at a nearby shop. Since then we have asked his mother to stay in the school premises while her child is here.” Many children with special needs come from economically backward sections, some mothers are not even given support towards their child and hence need to work and earn a living, in such situations if the parent has to spend the entire day in school it can become economically challenging. Unfortunately none of the schools visited had attendants to supervise the CWSN and almost all the schools required one parent of a student with special needs to stay back in the school with their child.

Students with locomotive disabilities require ramps in schools. However based on the data found in Table 1 only 25% of the schools had provision of ramps while 75% did not have a single ramp within its premises, making the school completely inaccessible to students with locomotive disabilities. The lack of ramps poses as a major challenge because it reduces the chances of such students in accessing schools by reducing their options. There are parents who have to travel 5-10 kilometers more with their child because the schools within their home range lack ramp facilities. This also leads to irregularity among disabled students. P6 mother of a girl with cerebral palsy asserted the struggle faced by her on a daily basis to take her daughter to school. “It is so difficult my daughter cannot walk properly, she requires the assistance of a wheelchair and the schools near my home don’t have ramps and also have a lot of stairs to climb. My daughter cannot manage. So initially I had reduced her schooling days to twice a week, but now I’ve found a new school which is around 25 minutes from home so I take her in the van there. But I still wish we had a good school closer to our home.”

Children with special needs require specific seating arrangements that ensure their easy accessibility to the class teacher while limiting their chances for distraction. The data provided in the table above indicates that 44% of schools had provisions for seating arrangements for students with disabilities which included seating them close to the teacher, seating in the first bench, seating next to a helpful student as well as special desk and chairs. However a majority of 56% of the schools did not have any such arrangements for their special needs students. In such situations the students with disabilities are often left neglected.

Children with special needs often require the access to special toilets that are conducive to their disability. However based on the data found in Table 1, it is evident that none of the schools visited had a special toilet within. Some schools did not even have a commode for the children to use. P7 a mother of a girl with severe locomotive disorder states “I go during the lunch break to school just to help my child use the toilet. Even then it is difficult

because they do not have special toilets and it is becoming so difficult for me to carry her because with age she is getting heavier and no assistance is available as well.”

The training of teachers in Inclusive education practices is one of the most important aspects in the road to success. In the data provided in Table 1, it can be seen that in 68.75% of schools teachers have received training in inclusive education while 31.25% did not receive any training at all. However such trainings have found to have several loopholes as explained by the teacher below. Participant 8 a primary school teacher stated “trainings are conducted, but all of us cannot go at the same time. So sometimes I am sent and sometimes the more senior teachers go and when they come back they teach us what was taught in those workshops.”

On being asked if he required more of such trainings he responded with:

“we definitely need more of such trainings because we as teachers also need practice and time to learn. Having such trainings once a year for a few hours is not always helpful also because inclusive education is not something that can be understood and learnt over night, it requires repetitive practice, knowledge, patience and understanding to gain clarity on such a subject. Only once the 3 steps are clear will implementation work better.”

V. Major Findings

The major findings of this research study including the following:

- It has been observed that despite legislative provisions transportations facilities are not provided for students with disabilities and their parents, which often results in absenteeism and challenges faced by parents in taking their child with special needs to school.
- Most schools visited had congested classrooms, dim lighting, lack of play grounds, proper toilet facilities, broken furniture and unhygienic surroundings. No child deserves to receive education in such an environment and for students with disabilities such surroundings can trigger their senses leading to aggressive behavior and meltdowns.
- Most schools lack Para- teachers and Special educators to assist them. Those special educators appointed do not follow up on students with special needs. There is a complete lack of coordination between the class teachers and special educators.
- Children with disabilities particularly those with ASD or ADHD can face sensory triggers in the form of sight, sound or smell, in the environment around them, leading to meltdowns. These meltdowns can often involve aggressive behavior and lead to inflicting self harm and harm on those around. In such scenarios the school must be aware of the students with sensitive sensory systems and have Behavior management plans ready, to deal with such situations. Unfortunately most schools do not have any plans at hand, nor are they aware of such needs.
- Through this research study it has also been found that schools lack basic infrastructural facilities that aid in the functioning of students with disabilities. The lack of ramps, special toilets and proper seating facilities can create tremendous pressure on students with special needs. The lack

of these amenities increases the dropout rate among CWSN, further denying them the fundamental right to Education.

- In this research it has also been found that while most schools were aware of inclusive education, training of teachers lacked regularity as a result of which haphazard practices were in force.

Thus these were the major infrastructural impediments to inclusive education for CWSN in primary government schools of West Bengal.

VI. Suggestions and Conclusion:

In order to secure the right to education for students with disabilities, it is important to ensure that firstly, every primary government school is made aware of the concept of inclusion and the essence behind it. Secondly, The Sub-Inspector of schools must ensure that all the schools within their circle have ramps, proper furniture, atleast one special toilet, and Para-teachers to assist the class teachers. Thirdly, Annual screenings should be made mandatory for all students to detect early traces of mental illnesses/ disorders. Fourthly, Training of all teachers in inclusive education must be made mandatory. A certificate course could be conducted on weekends to ensure all teachers are certified and well prepared in teaching and caring for students with special needs. Fifth, transportation must be made available by every school for their students with special needs. Sixth, The teacher student ratio must be maintained, and irrespective of the presence of a Para- teacher or special educator, all teachers must be able to handle students with special needs without treating them as the sole responsibility of the Para-teacher only. Lastly, awareness must be generated among schools, parents and community members on CWSN so as to eliminate any forms of stigma that pose as a challenge in their path to accessing education.

Infrastructural facilities play an essential role in accessing schools. Only when every school ensures the presence of such amenities will the enrollment rate increase and drop-out rate decrease among students with special needs. India still has a long way to go in ensuring 100% inclusion in education, and enforcing essential amenities and provisions can speed up the process and help students with disabilities, access the right to education without any challenges and discrimination.

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