

Inclusion: Transition from School to Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: The paper highlights the educational journey of visually challenged learners as they navigate the path from school to higher education. The policies and provisions of the Indian education system designed to enable the inclusion of learners with special needs constitute the theoretical foundation of the study. In this context, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 is especially relevant since it presents a revised version of the 1995 Act and incorporates contemporary concerns from the field of disability research and practice. The methodology includes an exploration of the experiences of visually challenged learners with the help of personal narratives and group discussions. The findings bring forth the challenges that learners face in their pursuit of career advancement. The critical role of enabling provisions in facilitating their educational progress and helping them realize their aspirations is another important aspect which emerges from the interpretive analysis.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, visually challenged learners, policies and provisions, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016

Introduction

The discourse on inclusion can be correlated with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948) which enabled the world to recognize the worth and dignity of each and every human being irrespective of considerations such as, gender, caste, creed, religion, nationality. It declares that, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

The preamble of UDHR states the following,

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.” In continuation, the General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

This international agreement formed the bedrock of ideas of equality and justice which flowered into an aspiration for an inclusive society. Subsequently, other documents such as the Jomtein Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) have been instrumental in carrying forward the torch of inclusion and inspiring a network of policies and practices that support inclusive education.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016: Indian Context

The policy perspective in India has largely been guided by the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. It served to establish the ground rules for empowerment of persons with disabilities. Disability research and practice have

evolved from the medical approach to the human rights perspective, as validated by India being a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007. Narayan and John (2017) have talked about how this necessitated the incorporation of this perspective in the new legislation, namely The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016. One of the major differences between the 1995 and the 2016 Act is an expanded definition of disability and the inclusion of 21 disabilities instead of 7. It takes into account contemporary issues and concerns, including in its ambit disabilities such as, acid attack victims, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, Parkinson's disease, haemophilia and thalassemia. The RPWD 2016 emphasizes autonomy of individuals, allowing them to make independent choices, human dignity, equality of opportunity and meaningful participation in society. The changing paradigm is reflected in the acceptance and celebration of disability on the continuum of the human diversity spectrum.

According to the RPWD Act, 2016, “the appropriate Government shall ensure that the PWD enjoy the right to equality, life with dignity, and respect for his or her own integrity equally with others.” Section 16 of Chapter III enlists the duty of educational institutions as follows,

“The appropriate Government and the local authorities shall endeavour that all educational institutions funded or recognised by them provide inclusive education to the children with disabilities and towards that end shall— (i) admit them without discrimination and provide education and opportunities for sports and recreation activities equally with others; (ii) make building, campus and various facilities accessible; (iii) provide reasonable accommodation according to the individual's requirements; (iv) provide necessary support individualised or otherwise in environments that maximise academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion; (v) ensure that the education to persons who are blind or deaf or both is imparted in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication; (vi) detect specific learning disabilities in children at the earliest and take suitable pedagogical and other measures to overcome them; (vii) monitor participation, progress in terms of attainment levels and completion of education in respect of every student with disability; (viii) provide transportation facilities to the children with disabilities and also the attendant of the children with disabilities having high support needs.”

Specific measures to promote and facilitate inclusive education under section 17 include the following,

“The appropriate Government and the local authorities shall take the following measures for the purpose of section 16, namely:— (a) to conduct survey of school going children in every five years for identifying children with disabilities, ascertaining their special needs and the extent to which these are being met: Provided that the first survey shall be conducted within a period of two years from the date of commencement of this Act; (b) to establish adequate number of teacher training institutions; (c) to train and employ teachers, including teachers with disability who are qualified in sign language and Braille and also teachers who are trained in teaching children with intellectual disability; (d) to train professionals and staff to support inclusive education at all levels of school education; (e) to establish adequate number of resource centres to support educational institutions at all levels of school education; (f) to promote the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes including means and formats of communication, Braille and sign language to supplement the use of one's own speech to fulfill the daily communication needs of persons with speech, communication or language disabilities and enables them to participate and contribute to their community and society; (g) to provide books, other learning materials and appropriate assistive devices to students with benchmark disabilities free of cost up to the age of eighteen years; (h) to provide scholarships in appropriate cases to students with benchmark disability; (i) to make suitable modifications in the curriculum and examination system to meet the needs of students with disabilities such as extra time for completion of examination paper, facility of

scribe or amanuensis, exemption from second and third language courses; (j) to promote research to improve learning; and (k) any other measures, as may be required.”

As we can discern from the discussion, the RPWD Act, 2016 provides a comprehensive framework to understand disability and inclusive education.

Research Methodology

The transitional phase from school to higher education formed the mainstay of the study. Thus, it was thought relevant to focus on students who were about to graduate from school, as well as those who had started college. Accordingly, ten students with visual impairment, from both the stages respectively, were chosen as participants. The methodology included an exploration of the experiences of visually challenged learners with the help of personal narratives and group discussions. The spotlight was on the nuances of the educational experience for learners, including orientation for college, career counseling, spatial orientation, mobility issues, negotiation with college culture. The analysis consisted of locating trends and correlating the findings with the policy perspective.

Interpretive Analysis

The interpretive analysis brought forth the challenge that students faced during preparing for admission into college. On the other side of the spectrum were the students who had cleared the initial hurdle of entry into higher education but were trying to adjust to the new educational environment. The next section presents the themes which have emerged from the analysis, while situating the narrative in the relevant policy framework.

The Transitional Phase

The following vignette is from an interview with Muskan, a grade XII student:

“I have been talking to many people who have joined college and they have told me about the problems they are facing. It makes me nervous to think how I will manage. How will I reach college without a school bus? The classrooms are on the second or third floor, there are no ramps. Reading material is also an issue.”

Seven students voiced similar apprehensions about their future in higher education, while three were sanguine about their prospects. The majority cited issues such as, mobility, longer distances required to reach college, lack of accessible infrastructure, need for orientation to the new environment especially curricular requirements and expectations.

The RPWD Act (2016), as discussed in a previous section of the paper, has specific provisions with regard to inclusive education. It endeavours to make educational institutions accessible to all, provide reasonable accommodation, as well as, transportation facilities, support individual's in environments that maximize academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion. International treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006) also foreground the promotion of educational rights of people with disabilities. These policy initiatives firmly place the responsibility of creating a conducive environment on the respective educational institutions. Yet, we find that the real time facilities in schools are inadequate in equipping high school students to confidently make the transition from school to college.

Coping with College Life

A recent entrant into the higher education system has the following to say about her experience, “I was very excited to join college. New places and people .. but after coming here, I am a little disappointed. I have hardly made any friends and the teachers are not approachable. I am

not sure of the readings given in the class and even if I get the reference, it is difficult to convert it into audio format.”

Six of the participants had a relatively negative perception of college life. They found the environment alienating and saw themselves as ‘outsiders’ in the institution. The initial experience of college was confusing, with the major hurdle being the lack of physical access. Ramps were available usually near the entrance but stairs needed to be used for accessing other areas. The facility of lifts was present but participants reported that it took them weeks to figure out its location. Other aspects, such as, Braille markings, QR codes, tactile tiles were few and far between. The RPWD Act (2016) spells out the provisions pertaining to standards of accessibility for the physical environment. However, these directions largely remain on paper and students with disabilities feel bereft of the benefits of the legal mandate.

The academic climate of the institution, specifically the learner-teacher interactions and the curricular material were other areas of concern. The RPWD Act (2016) mandates the following regarding the provision of educational resources. “The appropriate Government shall take measures to ensure that, - (i) all contents available in audio, print and electronic media are in accessible format; (ii) persons with disabilities have access to electronic media by providing audio description, sign language interpretation and close captioning; (iii) electronic goods and equipment which are meant for everyday use are available in universal design.”

In the above context, although tape recorders and other text-to-speech devices were made available to some students, others made personal arrangements. The libraries had a Braille books shelf and screen reading software installed in their computers but students did not use it very often. They cited their hectic schedule as the main reason for not being able to visit the library on a regular basis.

Learners with visual challenge reminisced about how the special educators in their schools supported them and liaised with the other teachers and administrators to ensure a proper learning environment. This included orientation and mobility training, provision of assistive devices, adaptation of assignments and examination papers. At the college level, neither is there a provision for special teachers nor is the university teacher trained in inclusive education practices. Thus, the learners felt unprepared to cope with the university ecosystem independently. They perceived that their college teachers displayed a lack of awareness and understanding about their special needs and pedagogic requirements. As a result, many students felt excluded from the mainstream. Experiential research studies based on learners with visual impairment corroborate this. Whitburn (2014) studied students’ opinions about teachers’ practices that increased their access and autonomy. They reported that they felt more included in the school when teachers used appropriate communication modes, made accessible resources available to students in a timely manner and were approachable outside of scheduled lessons for individual consultation. Opie, Deppeler, Southcott (2017) found that students experienced difficulties due to the time available, inability to access e-print and large format materials, problems in accessing assistive technology and exclusion from science, mathematics and physical education classes. The study concluded that in order to prevent exclusionary practices, educators and support staff need to understand the perspectives of students with visual impairment to better facilitate successful teaching and learning experiences.

Concomitantly, teacher attitudes towards learners with special needs can make the difference between inclusion and exclusion. Sometimes, the relationship between teacher and student remains distant because the teacher has had no exposure to a person with special needs and thus feels awkward in her presence. According to a research study conducted by Parasuram (2006), teachers feel more inclined towards inclusion if they have previously known a person with special needs.

In a similar context, Pandey and Pandey (2020) studied higher education for students with visual impairment in India. They emphasize that equal access to higher education is a civil liberties issue demanding immediate attention. The study found that there is an emergent need to focus on everyday living skills, quality of teachers, relevance of curriculum, advocacy and vocational opportunities. Teacher preparation and sensitization towards inclusive education is of utmost importance. There should be a seamless continuum from school to college. Guidance and counseling needs to equip students for the academic path after school, create awareness about the variety of career options open for the students and orientation to the college environment. Satapathy and Singhal (2002), has emphasized the importance of counseling in adolescents with visual impairment. Particularly important are the soft skills required in a relatively unstructured higher education environment, such as, time management, advocacy, independent as well as life-long learning.

As is evident from the above discussion, enabling policy frameworks for inclusion are in place, at the school, as well as, college level. However, meaningful inclusive education is possible when a strong foundation is built from the grassroots and carried forward at the tertiary phase with the guidance of all educational functionaries, including sensitive and aware teachers.

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