



Creating an Inclusive Classroom for ASD Pupils: Readiness of special educators in the Primary School

Sajda Khatun ¹, Dr. Minara Yeasmin ²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Aliah University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Aliah University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

To attain Sustainable Development Goals, it is important to ensure education for all (SDG4). In India, 1 in 500 or 0.20% or more than 2, 160, 000 people have autism. Inclusion of ASD children in normal classroom is the need of the hour. Assistance of the special educator and a trained teacher facilitates the students with ASD in knowledge transmission. Therefore, the availability of the special educators signifies the quality of inclusion in general classroom. To examine the availability of special educators in normal classroom, the researcher conducted the research. Data from the schools were collected by purposive sampling method. Scheduled interview and survey methods were observed as tool for collecting data. 30 Students, 20 teachers and parents of 30 autistic children of three private and Four Government schools of Kolkata were selected for the study. The findings of the descriptive research show that 2% students have ASD at primary level and only 36% trained teachers are available at primary level in general classroom. It is surprising to know that no special educator (0%) is available to cater the service to the students with special needs, especially to ASD pupil at primary level. 40% parents of autistic children reported that they received support from special educators from rehabilitation centre referred by school. The finding shows that inclusion of special educators in general classroom is still not in practice which makes difficult to ensure 'education for all' with special reference to NEP 2020.

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Introduction

"The Goal 4 (SDG 14) of the 2030 global Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by India in 2015 - seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (NEP 2020). To ensure quality education for all, inclusion of diverse learners in education system is the top priority of New Education Policy 2020. Inclusive education allows all students of all background to learn and grow side by side, to the benefits of all (UNESCO). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the disabilities among 21 disabilities mentioned under RPWD Act 2016 of India. Autism is a neurological and developmental disorder. It affects cognitive, emotional, social and physical health of the individual. In India 0.09% to 1.07% autism is prevalent in the age group of 0-17 years (RCI Book). ASD pupils are among the students of CWSN (Child with special Needs) and they need special support to adopt the school environment to grow with non-disabled peers. The role of special educator is significant to support students with different learning needs. Challenging behaviour commonly associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) includes aggression towards others, self-injurious (or self-harming) behaviours, and severe tantrumming. Special educators are specially trained to deal with diverse and challenging behaviour of students. The support of the special educators reinforces the learners with disabilities to control their behaviour in order to improve social interaction (Rdriguez *et al.*) in classroom.

The collaboration of teachers and special educators in the aspects of knowledge, readiness and attitude for an effective implementation of inclusive education in school is required for enhancement of the teaching-learning process. (Razalli *et al.* 2020) ^[1]. To meet the objective of NEP 2020 for making inclusive classroom, the availability of the special educators to provide support to ASD students is significant. Early diagnosis and proper guidance at early age develops the ability of ASD pupils. Therefore, it is significant to study the availability of the special educators in primary school classroom to implement NEP 2020 for making inclusive classroom to meet Sustainable Development Goal.

Objective of the study

- To find the percentage of pupils with ASD in general schools at primary classes.
- To identify the availability of special educators to ensure inclusive classroom.

Methodology

Data Collection & Tool: The present study was conducted to examine the availability of the special educators and to find the prevalence of ASD in primary school classroom. The sampling frame consisted of three private and four government schools which were selected by purposive sampling method. Data on students' enrolment at primary classes of seven schools is used for calculating the percentage of ASD pupils in primary classes. Survey and interview tools were used with parents and teachers to comprehend the availability of special educators in primary classes. The interview with the teacher gave insight into the teachers' concept of diverse learners and how they identify their needs. Teachers' identification of ASD pupils in classroom provided the primary data on the prevalence of ASD in primary school classroom. From seven schools (Private and Government school) 30 ASD pupils were identified by the teachers as per their observation. The parents of same ASD students' were the sample of the study. Closed-ended questionnaires were given to parents to collect data about how the school is assisting and helping autistic children and about the availability of special educators in classroom towards making inclusive classroom. Questionnaires were framed to ensure that it would elicit the data to meet the objective the study.

The questions were developed sought a range of data included basic information about the child, the type of assistance parents receive from the school in the classroom and quality of development student is observed by parents after enrollment in school. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant. However, many teachers including the head teachers were hesitant to inform about the number of ASD pupils present in classrooms as they lack quality of information to diversify the special need of the children. On the basis of their assumption, the numbers of the ASD pupils were taken into consideration. The skeptical statement of the teachers about ASD pupils arise questions on their ability to identify the need of the children in classroom. In the beginning, teachers were reluctant to participate. They were assured their name would not be revealed in any manner and it would be respected throughout the research process. After assurance, total 20 teachers of 7 schools took part and their observation and responses were recorded for the study. The sample of the interviewees included from both private and government school teachers.

Interpretation and Analysis

The collected data from the schools were analyzed to find the objective '*the percentage of pupils with ASD in general schools at primary classes*'. The descriptive analysis was carried on the basis of the data of seven schools including four government and three private schools. Total 1276 (Table 1) students are enrolled in seven schools at primary classes (I to IV). Out of 1276, 891 students are in four government schools and rest 385 students are from primary classes of private schools. From the view point of the teachers, it is noted that 30 students (Table 2) (Government school- 16 and private school- 14) from seven schools having Autism Syndrome Disorder. The obtained data was taken into consideration to estimate the percentage of prevalence of ASD in primary classes. The result determines the existence of 2% ASD pupils in primary school classroom. However, the percentage of ASD pupils present in government school is low from private schools counterpart. From four government schools 16 (1.8%) ASD pupils were identified. In contrast, three private schools reported enrolment of 14 (3.6%) ASD pupils in primary classes.

Table 1: Number of pupils, ASD pupils and teachers in seven schools

Particular	Total number students in primary classes (I to IV)	ASD students in primary classes	No of teachers
School 1 (Govt.)	212	5	5
School 2 (Govt.)	213	2	4
School 3 (Govt.)	224	3	4
School 4 (Govt.)	242	6	5
School 5 (Private)	140	4	6
School 6 (Private)	130	5	5
School 7 (Private)	115	5	5
Total	1276	30	34

Table 2: Details of pupils of Private and Government school:

Category	Students in primary classes	ASD pupils in primary classes	Number of Teachers	Teacher : Student
Government	891	16	18	1:50 (approx)
Private	385	14	16	1:21 (approx)

Table 3: Category of trained and untrained teachers:

School Category	No of Students	ASD Pupils	Trained Teachers	Untrained Teachers	Special Educator	Total Teachers
Government	891	16	6 (2 D.El.Ed., 3 Montessori Trained, 1 B.Ed)	12	0	18
Private	385	14	4 (1 D.El.Ed., 2 Montessori Trained, 1 B.Ed)	12	0	16
Total	1276	30	10	24	0	34

In light of the result obtained, the gap between the percentage of ASD pupils in government and private schools leads to examine the ratio of teacher-student in government and private schools. The data reveals that in government schools, ratio of teacher-student is 1:50 (approx) whereas in private school that is comparatively low 1:21 (approx) (Table 2). In four government schools total 18 teachers are present to teach 891 students (including 16 ASD pupils) and the number of teachers in three private schools is 16 for 385 students (including 14 ASD pupils) (Table 3). Acceptance of students with ASD in a general classroom is a positive attitude towards inclusive classrooms (Cassady, 2011) ^[2]. Due to the cluttered classrooms with a high density of students, diagnosing the needs of students becomes challenging for teachers.

Teachers identify influence and guide students with special needs through one-to-one interactions by implementing social learning setting with the support of proper classroom management.

The finding of the study suggests that 2 % ASD prevalence in the primary school classroom. To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4), fostering ASD pupils in the same classroom with proper assistance is one of the objectives of NEP 2020. The collected data of teachers from seven schools confirm the unavailability of special educators in both government and private schools. The responses of the teachers on provided close-ended questionnaires corroborate the presence of a lack of trained teachers in primary classes. 10 out of 30 are trained teachers, whereas only 3 of them are D.El.Ed., 5 teachers are Montessori trained and 2 teachers are B.Ed (Table 3). It is surprising to know that there is no special educator (0%) in primary classes. The incorporation of trained teachers (36%) in the ordinary classroom and their effectiveness towards ASD pupils were perceived from the responses of the parents of ASD pupils. 30 parents (any one of the parents- 22 mothers and 8 fathers) of autistic children were approached for the interview. Their view substantiates the unavailability of the special educator in an inclusive classroom. The findings noted that 10% of parents receive time-to-time feedback from teachers about their child's development and progress. It is apparent that students are enrolled in formal education in mainstream schools but parents affirm the lack of support and guidance for the special need of their children in school, especially to manage the emotions and behavior of the pupils. 91% of parents expressed their view on insufficient support and guidance from school to manage and deal with the behavior and emotional disorder of their children. However, as per the responses of 12 parents (40%), it is noted that they have the accessibility of a special educator who was referred by the school. External special educators are not present in general schools. It is a real challenge for teachers to ensure equity in the classroom without the availability of special educators.

Discussion

NEP 2020 focuses on inclusion of diverse learners towards making inclusive classroom to achieve the aim SDG4. Future teacher training program should encourage more positive attitude integrating diverse learners by providing them support for their special need. For making inclusive classroom, sufficiently trained teaching staff is necessary to manage students with diverse educational needs. Collaboration in teaching between special educator and mainstream teacher is very important to improve the quality of education for children with special needs who are learning in the mainstream classes (Razalli, Hashim, Mamat, Ariffin, 2020) ^[1]. The barriers to engagement and learning of all students will be diminished with joint efforts from schools, community and government agencies. NEP 2020 is one of the initiatives taken by government to promote equity and equality of education irrespective diversification. There is an estimated one in 100 children worldwide with Autism Syndrome Disorder (WHO). According to the World Health Organization, India has a low percentage. The awareness of ASD among the teachers helps to diagnose them. The appropriate knowledge and skills of teachers can therefore be beneficial for the social and academic development of students with autism. The untrained teachers failed to identify the special characteristic of ASD. The identified ASD pupils in inclusive classroom hardly get benefit due to the inaccessibility of special educators in inclusive classroom.

Limitation

The study is limited to the government and private schools of Kolkata. Due to the complexity of different age groups, the study is limited only to primary classes. There may be differences in the results between regions and among different age groups.

Conclusion

The primary data of the study explicit the prevalence of autism is approximately 2% in primary school classroom. The percentage of prevalence of ASD is 0.09- 1.07% all over India (RCI Report) Teachers with limited awareness and/or untrained in ASD are not able to meet the needs of unidentified ASD students in the classroom. With zero rejection policy (IDEA, 2001), the enrollment of ASD pupils increased in mainstream learning. The concern arises about the quality teaching by ensuring the individual need of children in inclusive classroom. Collaborative teaching is one of the approach towards making inclusive classroom successful (Ajuwon, 2008). In collaborative teaching, special educators are knowledgeable in skills and specific processes in dealing with special needs (Johnstone, 2010). The result shows that there are no special educators (0%) available in mainstream classroom. Including ASD pupils in inclusive classrooms (NEP 2020) without special educators is merely increasing the number

Of inclusive classrooms without addressing special needs of ASD pupils to bring equity. In some cases, school assists the parents by referring special educators from rehabilitation centre for emotional and behavioral management of child in order to bring equity in classroom. The major findings of the study identify the barrier of implementation of NEP, 2020 for making inclusive classroom successful.

Significance of the Study

This study will help to

- Comprehend the gap between NEP 2020 and its implementation to achieve SDG for all.
- Identify the number of students with autism prevalence in primary classes in inclusive classroom.
- How parents of autistic children receive assistance from school for the social and behavioral management of ASD pupils.

This study is significant in order to implement NEP 2020 for making inclusive classroom successful by understanding the barrier in the path of inclusion of ASD pupils in school at primary classroom.

Scope of further Study

The present study opens up the scope of further studies on the following areas:

- To structure the effective measures in order to implement the NEP 2020 for the inclusion of ASD in the inclusive classroom.
- To survey comparatively the availability of special educators in different parts of India.
- To identify barriers to implementing the various initiatives in the New Education Policy, 2020.

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