

Children with Special Needs: On a Path Towards Inclusion

Vrushali Dehadray

Assistant Professor,
 Center for Educational Studies
 Indian Institute of Education, Pune
 Email- vrushali_roy@yahoo.com

A supportive school environment plays important role in retaining the children with special needs in the main stream education. The objective of the study was to understand the nature of adjustment and problems of the CWSN in the inclusive schools. 52 CWSN from rural and urban primary schools having different types of special needs were studied. The findings have shown low level of participation of CWSN in classroom process and extracurricular activities, low level of peer support, denial tendency on part of the parents with respect to the disabilities, labeling by teachers and nonavailability of medical or psychology professionals.

[Key Words: CWSN, adjustment, problems, inclusive school]

In the present era of dynamic and rapid technological advancement, formal education plays an important role in education of all children. Providing access is necessary but not sufficient condition to facilitate learning. Supportive environment extended by the school authorities through policies and teacher's attitude and skills suffice the needs of the students with differential abilities. Inclusive education based on the principles set by the National Curriculum Framework can help the students to overcome the barriers aroused due to differential abilities. A supportive and encouraging environment is important in retaining the students with special needs in schools. Inclusive education can help in achieving the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education. The present situation demands identification of the children with special needs (CWSN) and create awareness among school management, teachers and other stakeholders about various aspects of adjustments of the CWSN e.g. infrastructural requirements, pedagogy, teacher's training. The present study is an attempt to understand problems faced by the CWSN with the special needs in inclusive schools.

Aim of the Project: The main aim of the present project is to understand the nature of problems faced by the students with the special needs in the process of adjustment in inclusive schools.

Conceptual Background - Adjustment

Adjustment refers to a state of complete equilibrium between an organism and its environment, a state wherein all needs are satisfied and all

organisms functions are being carried out smoothly (Reber, 1985). After family, school is the first socialising agent of the child. Adjustment of a child in the school is determined by two factors viz. school environment and inherent skills and capacities of the child. Several studies have shown that supportive environment can play a miraculous role in helping the child's adjustment in the areas of social, emotional, health and other learning processes.

Children With Special Needs (CWSN)

Operational definition of children with special needs for the present study is "Children with identified disability, health, or mental health conditions requiring early intervention, special education services, or other specialized services and supports; or children without identified conditions, but requiring specialized services, supports, or monitoring". In the present study, children having orthopaedic, hearing and visual impairment autism, learning disabilities were considered as CWSN.

Inclusive Schools

In its broadest and all encompassing meaning, inclusive education, as an approach, seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. It implies all learners, young people - with or without disabilities being able to learn together through access to common pre-school provisions, schools and community educational setting with an appropriate network of support services. This is possible only in a flexible education system that assimilates the needs of a diverse range of learners and adapts itself to meet these needs. It aims at all stakeholders in the system (learners, parents, community, teachers, administrators and policy makers) to be comfortable with diversity and see it as a challenge rather than a problem.

Research has shown that inclusive education results in improved social development and academic outcomes for all learners. It leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions because learners are exposed to real environment in which they have to interact with other learners each one having unique characteristics, interests and abilities. The non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes and actions towards learners with disabilities as a result of studying together in an inclusive classroom. Thus, inclusive education lays the foundation to an inclusive society accepting, respecting and celebrating diversity. In the present study, those schools which have admitted CWSN with other children were considered as inclusive schools.

Objectives of the Study -

1. To identify the students with special needs
2. To collect information regarding nature of adjustment problems of the students with special needs
3. To understand the views of the parents and teachers regarding adjustment of the students with special needs.
4. To frame the strategies for training the teachers and parents for helping these students as next phase of the project

Methodology and Sampling

The sample was collected from the schools in which CWSN were enrolled along with other children. As the school and social atmosphere in urban and rural area differs, it was decided to select the students from schools located in urban as well as rural setting. To select the urban students, the authorities of Marathi medium private-aided schools from Pune city, Maharashtra, India were approached and the students were selected from the schools which showed willingness to cooperate in the study. The schools were asked to provide a list of CWSN which they had prepared for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan authorities. From these lists, the students up to VIII grade were selected in such a way that at least one student from each of the categories of the special need would be a part of the researcher's sample. Before selecting the student, the researchers screened the students to confirm from their special need with the help of class-teacher of the respective student and based on the initial discussion with the students. To the surprise of the researcher, it was found that some of the teachers were unaware about the existence of such lists that were provided by the school authorities. In some cases, a normal student was enlisted as having learning disability or autism. In some cases, researcher realized in the rapport building session that the child was normal. In many schools, especially in urban schools these type of grave mistakes were observed. The students showing below average achievement were simply stamped as autistic or having learning disability (LD). In very few cases, diagnosis of LD or autism was done by the medical or psychology professional. This kind of stamping by a non-professional person may have grave effects on future of the students. Total 27 students from 5 urban schools were selected of which 16 were boys and 10 girls. For selecting rural sample, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan authorities of Pune Zilla Parishad were approached. A list of CWSN enrolled in Zilla Parishad schools of Haweli Tahsil of Pune district was collected. From this list 25 CWSN (20 boys and 4 girls) were selected who represented all categories of special needs.

Data Collection

A data were collected with the help of following tools from the CWSN, their teachers and parents-

- 1) Interview Schedule for CWSN, 2) Interview Schedule for Teachers
- 3) Interview Schedule for teachers 4) Observation Schedule for CWSN

The observation schedule was used for CWSN enrolled in primary classes i.e. I to IV grades and for some of the slow learners who could not respond the questions from the schedule. Out of 52 students, interview schedule was filled for 29 students and remaining 23 students were observed in school campus for two days during school hours.

Student Profile

Total 52 students comprised the sample of which 36 were boys and 14 were girls. A category-wise distribution of the students is as follows-

Table 1: Category-wise Distribution of Student

Sr. No.	Category of Special Need	Total Students	Boys	Girls
1	Orthopaedic Impairment	12	9	3
2	Visual Impairment	3	2	1
3	Hearing Impairment	7	4	3
4	Speech Impairment	6	4	2
5	Learning Disability	9	5	4
6	Autism	3	3	0
7	Mentally retarded	2	0	0
8	Slow Learner (Auditory and speech impairment)	9	8	1
9	Multiple Disabilities	1	1	0
	Total	52	36	14

Aspects of Adjustment of CWSN

Different aspects of scholastic adjustment and overall impression about the school of CWSN were assessed by the researcher. All 29 students reported that they liked their school. Various reasons were quoted by them for developing positive attitude towards school. The pattern of answers was same for urban and rural students. Some of the important reasons given by them were as follows-

- Liking for teachers and their teaching
- Liking for friends
- Getting opportunity to learn new things
- Access to sports facilities and opportunities

All of them told that they were dropped to school by auto-rickshaw, by parents or other relatives to school. Hence, they faced no problem in commutation.

Participation in Extracurricular Activities

The CWSN mentioned a range of extracurricular activities in which they participated. They reported that in spite of their weaknesses, they participated in sports, dance, drawing cultural activities etc. They liked these activities because it gave them opportunity to excel in the field in which they were good at. On the other hand the activities they disliked were the one in which they could not participate due to their handicap. The students having orthopaedic impairment mentioned that they did not like outdoor sports. Activities like drama, elocution, singing were disliked by the students having auditory and speech impairment. Around 5 percent students told that they never

participated in any of the extracurricular activities on their own. Though around 70 percent of them reported that they were participating in the activities mentioned above, they stated various problems they faced during the process such as difficulty in balancing the body, understanding the instructions, taking care of hearing aid while performing various activities etc. Some of them added further that teasing by other children discouraged them in participating in these activities. However, a contradictory picture was depicted when the teachers were asked about the same issue. They reported that a very few CWSN participated in extracurricular activities. It seems that they wanted to participate in these activities but their special needs held them back. Their desire to participate was so strong that they were tempted to give affirmative response to the researcher's question.

Problems in Process of Learning

It was noticed that the nature of problems differed according to nature of special need. The students having orthopaedic problem experienced a problem of time management. They could not complete the class work and examination papers in assigned time. They could manage with the help of extra time was provided in examination, but they experienced problem in managing the class-work. Some of the students having orthopaedic problem were undergoing a treatment or series of operations due to which they had to miss school days. They used to find it difficult to complete the missing portion. The teachers did not pressurize them to go with the class as they could not keep pace with them. They felt left out as they could not join others in physical training (PT) classes. Students with hearing impairment had problem in understanding the classroom instructions and giving oral answers. They also faced problems in oral examination and hence were afraid of oral exams. The slow learners had problem in comprehending the classroom instruction. Only few teachers were ready to explain again. These children had difficulty in understanding when they remained absent even for a single day. The students with visual impairment had difficulty in viewing the blackboard in spite of the treatment. They could not read at a stretch for a long time due to weak eyesight. It interfered in completing the class and home assignments. One of the students who were fully blind informed that he had learnt the brail but as the textbooks were not available in brail, he was finding it difficult to study. It was observed that visual and auditory impairment makes the understanding of complex concept difficult.

The students having visual and auditory problem suffer more in learning process than orthopaedic impairment. It takes more time for them to complete any activity as compared to others.

Relationship with Teachers

The CWSN were asked to mention the name of the teacher they liked most and reasons for it. Almost all the students had affinity towards a particular teacher. Only around 10 percent students liked a particular teacher because he/she went out of the way to help these students. 60 of the students liked the respective teachers due to their teaching style. Around 38 percent stated that the

personality characteristics such as understanding and compassionate nature and patience to repeat the lesson did appeal them most. They mentioned that these teachers were always ready to explain the same topic repeatedly until they understand, did not get angry with them even though it took extra time for them to understand. They also taught them better ways of studying.

They were also asked to mention a name of the teacher they disliked and its reason. The answers revealed that though the most liked teachers were appreciated due to her/his teaching style, it was not the case with the disliked teachers. The students disapproved the personality and not the teaching style of the teachers when it came to rate them on dislike. Most of the students complained that their teachers used to get irritated with them, scolded them, frequently complained to their mothers about their unsatisfactory performance, never explained the difficult concepts again, and did not give extra time to solve maths problems. Eight percent of the students denied that there were any teachers who they disliked. Some of them added further that one should not speak ill about their teachers. This comment shows that there were some teachers whom they disliked but due to a strong moral binding, they were not ready to disclose the name.

Relationship with Peers

Most of them reported that their classmates teased them due to their handicap. They also accepted that some of their friends could understand their problems and helped them in studies and other activities. Friends of the CWSN having auditory problems used to explain the teacher's instructions as well as explained other students what the CWSN intended to communicate. Sometimes even teachers had to depend on these friends to understand the speech of these students. They gave their notebooks to copy the missing work. Some of the students having orthopaedic problem were in need of constant supervision and assistance. The classmates helped them in carrying school bag, helping in toilet, massaging ailing limbs, provide first aid etc. In group activities, a simple work suitable to their abilities was assigned to them. In free time they were rarely alone. In two urban schools, there is special unit for the students having hearing impairment. It was noticed that these students always mingled with the students having same problem. Rarely did they mix with other students from their class.

The observations of younger students revealed that most of them developed intimate relations with one of the classmates. He/she is the mentor and liasoning person between the respective CWSN and other classmates and even teacher. The students having orthopaedic, visual and auditory problems were rarely teased by the classmates. On the other hand, CWSN who were mentally retarded, slow learners or having speech problems were the frequent targets of children's bully. Greater the extent of teasing, lesser was the participation of the students in and outside classroom activities.

Sunil is a V standard boy studying in Zilla Parishad school. He suffered from multiple disabilities. He cannot use his limbs even to carry out his daily chorus. he is also having speech disorder. He writes using toes. His peers help

him in school. They not only carry his school bag but also feed him, help to drink water and also give all assistance required in using toilet. He says it would have been difficult to attend the school without the help given by peers.

Expectations from School

None of the students expressed any desire to change the school. They believed that their school was best for them. However, they expected some modifications in school policies, rules and facilities for their development. All the students having orthopaedic problem felt that the school should make arrangement of some special sports for them so that they could play during P.T. period.

Teachers' Idea of Inclusive Education

Total 27 teachers were interviewed. They were asked to tell their idea of inclusive education. Seven teachers told that they did not know the meaning of the term inclusive education. Around 50 percent of them could tell the appropriate meaning of inclusive education and remaining teachers had wrong ideas about inclusion. All these teachers had at least one CWSN in their class. Except two, no teacher had any prior experience to interact with children with special needs and none of them had given any training.

Perception of Teachers regarding Problems of CWSN in the Process of Adjustment

50 percent of the teachers believed that the CWSN from their classes did not face any problem in adjusting with the school environment. However, other teachers agreed that the CWSN faced problems in studies, extracurricular activities, and interacting with peers. The main problems perceived by them were as follows-

- Due to low level of achievement, other students were not ready to accept the CWSN in their group or avoided them.
- When the CWSN were not accepted by the peers or teased by them, it affected their confidence and they did not initiate interactions with others.
- As the speed of writing, reading and comprehension of CWSN was comparatively less, especially children with auditory impairment and slow learners found it difficult to keep pace with the class and get frustrated.
- They avoided using the devices such as hearing aid because of teasing by other children.

Only eight teachers informed that the sample CWSN participated in extra and co-curricular activities like other children. 50 percent of the teachers told that their participation was very limited. Though handicap was the main obstacle in participating in the activities, some of them thought that it was not the actual handicap but lack of confidence and fear of being ridiculed in front of others kept them away from participating in various activities. They preferred to participate in the activities in which the viewers did not easily discover their handicap. E.g. student having orthopedic impairment prefer to participate in

drawing competition rather than sports. The students with auditory problem preferred to participate in sport activities.

Role of Teacher in Students' Adjustment in School

Seven teachers stated that their students did not need any help in getting adjusted. The teachers from the school where there was a special unit for the students having hearing impairment stated that the teachers from the Unit provided all kind of assistance these students so their help was not needed. Some of them stated that they tried to encourage them to participate in various activities. Though students viewed the teachers positively in lending them extra support, it was felt from the responses of the teachers that a very few of them were interested in providing additional academic help or even a moral support. Similarly, no attempts on the part of the teachers were observed in forbidding the other children from teasing them. Though they used to scold these students because of their poor performance, they were not keen on providing positive feedback to the CWSN. Indifference of the teachers may do more harm than if they would have scolded them which is in fact a sign of providing attention and responsiveness. When asked about the problems they faced while teaching these students, varied responses were obtained.

On one hand 25 percent teachers denied they faced any problems while teaching these students, where as 50 percent teachers told that they did not possess any knowledge and skills of teaching CWSN especially children other than having orthopedic problem. In such cases, they depended on the friends of CWSN or the special teachers appointed for them. Most of the teachers thought that frequent contact with the parents sufficed their responsibility towards these students. They made the brighter students sit next to these students and help them. 50 percent of the teachers thought that these schools were adequate for CWSN. Others felt that inclusive schools are beneficial for the students having milder form of special need but for extreme case of mental retardation, autism and blindness, special schools are necessary. The teachers felt that their schools should provide some additional facilities to support adjustment process of these students. Counselling services, devises, specially designed sports and play material, separate unit to facilitate learning, extra classes should be arranged for the CWSN. A large number of teachers felt that if a school management was admitting the CWSN, they should arrange the training programs for the teachers to facilitate teaching-learning process in inclusive classroom.

All the teachers agreed that inclusive education has some positive impact on all type of students. The CWSN get motivated and learn normal ways of facing the problems in daily life where as normal students develop compassion towards CWSN and learn to help them. When talking about the adverse effects, 26 percent believed that there are no adverse effects due to inclusion. Others felt that when students with differential abilities are studying together, brighter students take less time to learn and they get bored and distract others. If they pay more attention to slow learners, it is at the cost of negligence of other students.

Adjustment Problems as perceived by the Parents

Most of the parents told that initially their children faced problems in the school because the other children teased them but as the time passed, the relationship between them improved and after few months, their classmates started helping them whenever necessary. In case of studies, parents stated that the students having auditory and speech problems faced difficulty in oral exams. They reported that the children liked to participate in various activities but due to their handicap, it got restricted. Around 80 percent of the parents reported that their children were well treated by the teachers. Others stated that some of the teachers were aware about the problems of their children; even then they kept on complaining about their performance. They were informed by the teachers regarding improvement of their wards, their classroom behaviour etc. They expected that they should get concession in fees, as they had to spend lot of money on their treatment. They also felt that their children should get all the rights without reminding them about their special needs. All the teachers should be trained in teaching these children. Some programmes needs to be organised to create awareness among the normal children about CWSN.

A tendency to deny the needs of their children was also observed among few parents, especially parents of the slow learners and autistic children.

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that though policy of inclusion of CWSN in schools is beneficial, some strategic decisions needs to be made by setting suitable learning challenges to the students, responding to students' diverse learning needs through proper planning to create effective learning atmosphere. The teachers need to be oriented to provide motivation, equal opportunities through differential teaching approaches. The assessment strategies should match the abilities of the students. The school policies should help the students to overcome potential barriers to learning and assessment. Individual plans can be prepared for the disabled students with the help of the parents by equally distributing the responsibility of supporting the CWSN between parent and teachers. Different programmes need to be arranged to create sensitivity among the students, teachers and parents about the diverse needs of students. With concrete goal and well planned strategy, the CWSN can be mainstreamed in such a way that a whole system will help in adjustment process of them walking on the path from mere integration towards inclusion.

References

- National Curriculum Framework 2005. New Delhi: NCERT
 Dasgupta, P.R. (2002). Education for the disabled. In S. Hegarty & M. Alur (Ed.) Education & children with special needs. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
 Mohanty, J. & Mohanty, S. (2011). Inclusive education. New Delhi: NCERT
 Reber, A.S. (1985). Dictionary of Psychology. London: Penguin Books.

[The final revised version of this paper was received on 11 November 2015]