

The Need for Disability Sensitization in Schools and Communities of India

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Abstract

Persons with disabilities battle the pre-existing challenges that emerge as a result of their condition and often society can often further limit the accessibility of such persons in the forms of stigmatization and discrimination on the grounds of disability. 75% of children with special needs still remain out of school in India while the highest number of disabled persons are found between the age group of 10-19 years. Despite the prevalence of legislations upholding the Rights of Persons with disabilities, the lack of community sensitization continues to pose as a major barrier that limits inclusion. Ridicule, mockery, bullying and avoidance of students with disabilities among community members is prevalent due to the lack of disability awareness and inclusive education training that would ensure the normalization of students with disabilities in educational and community setups. Thus this paper aims to examine the need for disability sensitization among teachers and parents of primary governments schools. This is a sequential mixed-method study conducted in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah in the state of West Bengal. Participants were selected with the aid of purposive sampling method. Data was collected from teachers and parents through structured interview schedules and in-depth interview guides. While the analysis of this study was carried out with the assistance of SPSS and Atlas ti software. The results of this study reveal the lack of disability sensitization in schools and suggest for methods through which these barriers can be eliminated.

Keywords: Disability, sensitization, children with special needs, students with disabilities, Right to Education, Rights of persons with disabilities.

Introduction

Globally over a billion people exist with some form of disability. This number is expected to increase to 2 billion by the year 2050. Disability can be described as a condition that impairs the functioning of the body or mind by limiting the individual's ability to perform certain tasks or part take in certain activities as well as interact with the world around them. Disabilities can affect one's vision, hearing, speech, cognitive abilities, movement, communication of needs and social relationships with others. According to the World Health Organization, there are three dimensions through which disability can be viewed, first is impairment, in physical or mental functioning that can be found in the forms of loss of memory or vision. Second, Activity

limitation, i.e. facing challenges in walking, remembering, or seeing. Third, Limitation of participation in regular daily activities, social engagements and other services.

Currently there are 2.68 cr disabled persons in India. Out of which 2.41% of the disabled population are males while 2.01% are females. The number of disabled children in India is highest amongst the age group of 10-19 year with a population of 46.2 lakhs. Reports further state that 75% of children with disabilities remain out of schools in India while 27% of Children with Disabilities have been found to have never attended any educational institutions.

Disability inclusion emerged as a need to make societal structures more accessible to persons with disabilities. An important component of these structures are educational institutes. In India Education became a fundamental Right with the 82nd Amendment of 2002, falling under Article 21 A of the Constitution. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) emerged in the year 2000-2001 playing an important role in ensuring free and compulsory education for all till the age of 14 years. The Right to Free and Compulsory education Act of 2009 and The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, are the two legislations that secure the Right to education for students with disabilities under the term “inclusive education.” Even though directives towards inclusive educational practices have been enforced upon all schools across the country, children with disabilities continue to face discrimination on the grounds of their limitations. Lack of cooperative teachers, knowledge and community sensitization result in bullying, ridicule and stigmatization, leaving students with disabilities in a disadvantaged position and deprived of the actualization to their Right to Education.

Thus this research study paper focuses on the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their parents in primary schools of West Bengal with aim of providing appropriate solutions to improve their current plight.

Literature Review

“Stigmatization involves identifying and marking an undesirable characteristic in a way that narrows a person’s social identity to that characteristic. The consequences of stigmatization include marginalization and, in some cases, dehumanization.” (Chen & Courtright, 2016)

A research paper published in the year 2015 states that the levels of stigmatization vary with different educational settings. In integrated school settings, students with special needs may face stigmatization and may feel devalued by their non-disabled peers, which can have a negative impact on the child’s self-esteem. While on the other side, students who receive education in completely segregated settings or special education schools are prevented from insight into such feelings of being devalued or looked down upon. Negative attitudes among teachers towards students with disabilities is also observed to be very common.

Research studies show that teachers not only consider teaching students with disabilities to be difficult but they also consider such students to be less intelligent. (Xhaferri, 2015)

In a research study conducted which aimed at evaluating the attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities in India, it was found that while teachers were in support of inclusive education programs, they were not sure as to how would they integrate inclusive practices into mainstream school education. On the other hand it was also recognized that attitudes based on cultural assumptions/biases were the most difficult to modify. Such biases run through communities, schools, parents and even governments. (Kumar, 2016) Hence it is essential for awareness and sensitization to be included at the heart of inclusive education practices. Success towards this inclusion in education can only be achieved when all children are treated as equal being irrespective of their functional capacities.

Research also indicates that the involvement of parents and community members in the decision making of the school in relation to children with special needs and education leads to more beneficial outcomes. Collaboration between schools, parents and communities in an efficient manner is deemed important in the journey to inclusion. It is only in an environment where everyone is equally comfortable and information is disseminated in a democratic manner can decisions be made sensibly. It is important to engage parents and foster the practice of parents supporting other parents whilst ensuring government support and school cooperation. (UNICEF, 2014)

Disabilities are not only physical or mental in nature, they bring with them different experiences, situations and emotions that affect the individual in various ways. Persons with disabilities have several limitations in their path to begin with hence instead of showing pity and being sympathetic society needs to evolve towards an empathetic approach by not further creating restrictions/limitations for disabled persons and by creating spaces and structures which are disability friendly and free from stigmatization.

It is here that the approach of sensitization emerges and needs to be provided highest priority by the governments, schools and parent communities. Sensitization involves acknowledging the existence of the person (with disabilities) and understanding their pain, while accepting that there are different ways of living and irrespective of how person lives, it is their fundamental right to live in society. (DEOC, 2018)

Research Methodology

The aim of this paper is to examine the stigmatization of Children with special needs in primary government schools. The paper remains a part of the Mixed method study on inclusive education practices, outcomes and limitations which was conducted in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah in the state of West Bengal . The participants of this study were selected through the assistance of purposive sampling. Twenty schools participated in this study which included parents, teachers, and special educators. Data collection took place between the months of January to April 2019. The Data was collected with the assistance of structured

interview schedules and in-depth interview guides. While data analysis was aided by SPSS and Atlas ti softwares.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The Quantitative part of my research study was analyzed through the process of simple descriptive statistics with the assistance of SPSS while the qualitative part was analyzed with the application of thematic analysis aided by Atlas ti.

Two dimensions that are vital in disability sensitization are the teachers and parent community. It is only through the dissemination of information and knowledge to these major stakeholders can inclusion be carried out whole heartedly without the barriers of stigmatization that limit the Right to an all inclusive education set up for CWSN.

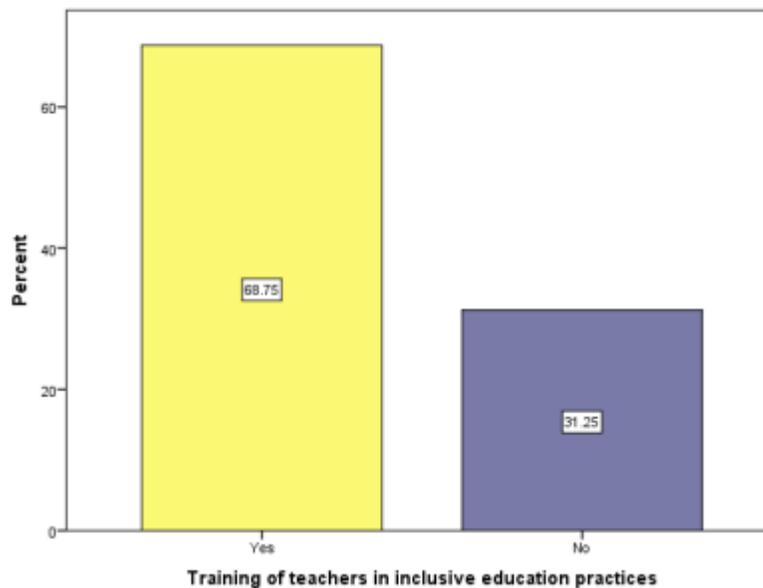


Figure 1

From the data provided in Figure 1, it is evident that while 68.75% teachers have received some form of training in inclusive education practices, 31.25% teachers had never received any training in inclusive education. Even amongst the teachers that did receive training, traces of half hearted sensitization, lack of knowledge, teaching techniques and patience was found to be a major hindrance due to the existence of loopholes in the process of training.

P1 A class III teacher of a primary government school from the district of Hooghly stated the following with regard to the workshops on Inclusive education carried out by the government.

“They (the trainings) are conducted for 2 days mostly and for few hours each day. Since the workshops always fall on week days it is not possible for us all (teachers) to attend it as the children come for classes here. Hence a maximum of 2 teachers are sent from our school...

...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 these steps are clear will implementation work better.”

P2 the head teacher of the same school stated that she had attended such a workshop only once in her life and on being asked to describe a practice that was taught at the workshop she stated the following:

“Well it was a long time ago so I don’t remember much. It was about special needs kids only. I am so busy as head teacher, so I generally send two teachers to attend it and they come back and tell us a little about the workshop. What more can I do.”

P3 A mother of a child on the Autism Spectrum Disorder spoke about rejection faced by her child with special needs:

“Yes my child does face subtle rejection. At the previous school I was asked to not bring my child regularly to school because the teachers lacked the ability to accommodate a disabled child in the class. However this school is much more cooperative and supportive. Well I felt really bad but I couldn’t say anything. I obeyed whatever they said after all they are the school, they have authority, we are dependent on them, since my daughter is disabled I don’t have a choice sometimes I get angry at such teachers but sometimes I feel grateful to them because at least they had admitted her into their school. But anyway I took her out of that school eventually because I wanted something more regular for her.”

From the data mentioned above, it is clear that while majority of the teachers did receive training in inclusive education practices, such trainings were conducted irregularly and haphazardly. Due to the lack of regular training sessions ensuring the presence of all teachers of government schools sensitization continues to remain a major barrier between teachers and students with special needs. It is the lack of training that makes it difficult for teachers to conduct classes with students who have hyperactivity or meltdowns. Such instances are interpreted as “disturbances” to teachers and leads to a negative approach with the parent as expressed by P3 who was asked to not bring her child to school regularly.

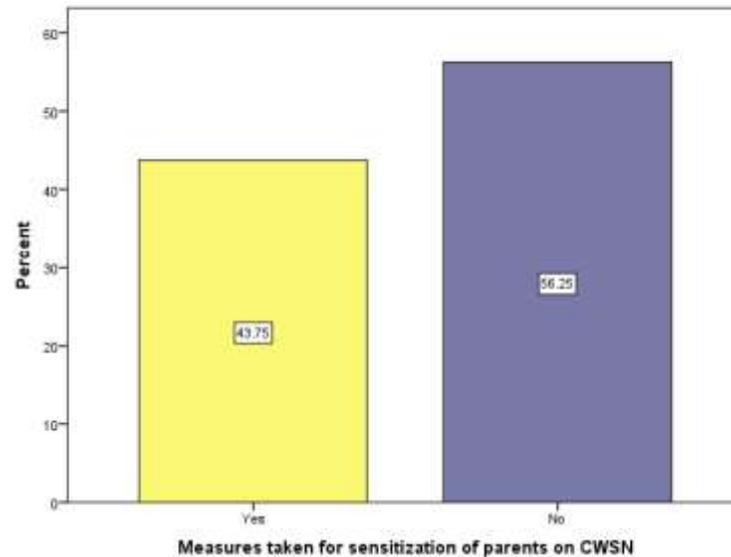


Figure 2

From the data provided in Figure 2 it can be seen that majority of the schools i.e. 56.25% did not have any plans or programs for sensitization of parents and community members not were such programs conducted by the government authorities to raise disability awareness in the districts. The 43.75% of schools that did sensitize parents, mostly dealt with parents of CWSN without any attempt of involving parents of non-disabled students.

P4 a mother with an 8 year old daughter stated the following with regard to the need for disability sensitization:

“Here (school community) the mentality is very bad. Not only the children but even parents make fun of my daughter. It is very difficult for us. They called my daughter mad. They keep calling her names. Each time we pass by they smirk at my daughter and they make a lot of fun of her. Children see their parents and learn to do the same...”

... “If I am around I try to check people. But how much can one say. We live among them. I have to keep the peace. No matter what you say people will not understand because they do not have a child who is handicapped so they do not know the challenges and feelings we go through...”

...“It is mentally very frustrating to live among people who think that your only child is mad when she is battling multiple disabilities. We need people to be more aware and understanding. It is already difficult for us as a family and having an unsupportive environment around makes it only worse.”

P3 mother of a child with ASD who has witnessed her son get bullied and been dismissed by parents of non-disabled students stated the following:

“If I see any other child bullying him I teach them not behave like that because at the end of the day they are only kids. If we don’t teach them, then who will? When kids are taught something from a young age they learn, and here since there is not much exposure I cannot even blame the children for bullying my son. All I can do as a parent is teach them right from wrong...

On being asked about her rapport with other parents she states that:

...No there is no chance of rapport. Other parents do not interact with us. They do not consider our family to be normal. They do not give us any importance or notice. When I try to talk to them to find out about when the exams will be held, they turn their faces away. We feel very bad. The school also focuses more on non-disabled children. Incidents have occurred where teachers have asked me to take him out of the class because he is fidgety and refuses to sit in one place. They consider it to be too troublesome to handle and ask us to leave.”

P5 mother of a child with Down syndrome stated the following:

“Other parents don’t mix with me or even come close to us. They even warn their children that if they interact with my son then they too will get the disease my son has. They do not understand that my child has a disorder that is far from a communicable disease. But they do not know the difference. It gets difficult at times.”

The statements made by parents above make it very clear for an urgent need towards disability sensitization. In trying to meet with the diverse needs of their children, parents of CWSN face difficulties on a daily basis and society should not be one of them. If at all communities and parents of non-disabled children should offer immense support and encourage parents of CWSN in all their endeavors. However in order to reach such conclusions, the dissemination of clear and consistent knowledge among parents and communities is essential. Only when awareness is propagated will discrimination diminish. Therefore it is here that schools along with parents and the local government bodies need to take charge as the major stakeholders and decision makers in the lives of students with disabilities in joining hands to bring about change.

Suggestions and Conclusion

Teachers, Parents and the local governing bodies hold the key to diminishing stigmatization against children/ persons with disabilities. Disability sensitization is essential because:

- Children with special needs are still bullied by their peers and abused by their teachers
- Parents of CWSN face ridicule, mockery and shame
- Families with persons with disabilities are discriminated against
- Infrastructural barriers continue to remain e.g. lack of special toilets, ramps, resources etc
- Societal barriers are far worse. They can lead to severe mental health problems like depression and anxiety among parents of CWSN

- Most CWSN drop out of school post primary level of education
- Many CWSN are still kept in the closet in fear of societal stigmatization
- Teachers and parents are still unaware of the No-rejection policy
- Communities still believe that disabilities and mental illnesses are communicable diseases that can spread from one person to another by physical or close contact
- The persistence of biases leads to discrimination which results in denial of basic fundamental rights to persons with disabilities.

Firstly, Parents of children with special needs must be made aware of the rights that their children have. Provisions contained in the Right to Education Act of 2009 and Rights of Persons with disabilities Act 2016 must be made clear to them. Parents of children with special needs must be given access to psychologists, psychiatrists, physiotherapists, neurologists, orthopaedics and other necessary specialists as and when in need. They should receive the support of local counselors, sub-inspector of schools, special educators and other primary resource persons regularly. It is important to empathize with parents and their children with special needs and to treat them with compassion and equality. Initiative must also be taken to ensure that such parents are empowered and self sufficient in knowledge and resources so that they can raise their voices against those who ridicule their children and mock their parenting without the feeling of indebtedness and obligation towards any authority that utilizes its powers irresponsibly.

Secondly, Teachers being the primary game changer in the field of education, play an essential role in making the future of inclusive education bright by giving it a strong foundation in the present. Teachers must be mandated to keep themselves aware and updated on inclusive education practices. They should be given knowledge on the rights of children with special needs and the various legislations, policies and programs through which they can guide parents as well as themselves aid students with disabilities. Teachers must be trained regularly in inclusive education. They should also be given access to various resources through which they can improve their classroom environment for students with special needs. Teachers should be encouraged to take a strong stand against the bullying of CWSN and foster compassion and empathy between students while educating parents of non-disabled children along similar lines as well.

Thirdly, The local government bodies comprising of the DPO, SSM, and the SI of schools should keep a track of the enrollment rate of students with disabilities, follow up on drop outs and make provision for suitable vocations for those who cannot continue with higher education. The local bodies must work alongside teachers and parents of students with disabilities in creating a better future for the well being of children. They can partner with NGO's and other local organizations in conducting public speaking, workshops and camps on spreading awareness on inclusion, disabilities, the rights of persons with disabilities and sensitization towards the needs of persons with disabilities. Strict rules must be enforced to

ensure penalization of persons who ridicule, harass and discriminate against Persons/families with children/persons with special needs.

Initially it is important to ensure that the three major stakeholders are completely sensitized towards children with special needs. No cause can bring about change without complete belief in the cause. It is only when the local bodies, teachers and parents community gain sensitization, can they join hands in working together towards the same goal. Persons with disabilities deserve the same rights and accessibilities as any other human. If a person's disability incapacitates them, society must step in to facilitate them. It is only through knowledge, acceptance and change can development take place and persons with disabilities can also emerge as contributors towards communities, societies and economies with adequate support and assistance. After all like the saying goes "*there is no greater disability in society than the inability to see a person as more.*"
– Robert M. Hensel

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