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NEP, 2020 and education of children with disabilities

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Abstract

Children with disabilities are frequently discriminated against in myriads of places, which often leads to their exclusion from society at large. To address this exclusion and discrimination, the National Education Policy, 2020 was introduced. This essay aims to understand the extent to which the new policy will accommodate and nurture children with disabilities and what still remains to be done in order to guarantee an inclusive space for these children.

Keywords: Children with disabilities, NEP, 2020, inclusive education

Introduction

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was praised for its barrier-free access to education for all children across the country. Mainly because it dispels the darkness and opens a new era of inclusion in the education system, as the government claims. Inclusive education in India has existed, for the most part, at the expense of the exclusion of children with disabilities. Disability often stands as a high wall between children and education; in fact, it hinders children's access to education. This fact is reinforced by the evidence that only half of the disabled population is literate. In fact, in the 3-35 age group, only 62.5% of people with disabilities attended school. The policy includes many provisions to ensure inclusive education. This essay critically examines education policy and considers overly ambitious provisions to discard the true meaning of inclusion in education for children with disabilities. Each child is unique. Children have their own strengths and weaknesses. Its development proceeds in certain sequences, but the pace can vary. It is only natural that some children excel in some areas but have shortcomings in others. However, if children show significant problems or difficulties in one (or more) areas of development, and their performance shows significant discrepancies compared to other children of the same age, it is advisable to refer the children for professional evaluation. Children progress rapidly in the first few years and many changes are expected in a year or even a month. For this reason, even experts may have difficulty making a definitive diagnosis based on a child's condition. On the other hand, it is precisely the plasticity of the child's development that makes early identification and intervention important. With early identification of children's development and learning problems and quick referral for assessment, it helps us understand and support children's conditions and needs in development and learning.

Meaning of Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities mean children with mental retardation, hearing impairment (including deafness), difficulty with speech or language, visual impairment (including blindness), severe emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic disorder, autism, head trauma, other health disorders, a specific learning disorder, deaf-blindness or multiple disabilities and which, for this reason, require special education and related services.

School Choices

The NEP has cleared up the confusion about the means of achieving education for disabled children. The two previous Acts, namely (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 ("RPwD Act") and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009("RTE Act"), which incorrectly established three means of allowing children to receive their education varied between these three options mentioned below.

- i. Special schools (RPwD Act)
- ii. Neighborhood schools (RPwD Act and RTE Act)
- iii. Homeschooling (RTE Act)

NEP corrects this problem by recognizing the three options for your education. However, some concerns remain unresolved.

Home Schooling

It is important to check the home-schooling for the quality of the home-based education provided to the children through such means is concerning; checking also helps in gauging the efficiency and effectiveness of such means of administering education. The National Policy of Education, 2020 aligns with the norms mentioned in the RPwD Act with regards to the checking of home-based education.

However, the Block Level Resource Persons who help in providing the home-based education have raised alarming concerns with regards to the working conditions. The work of a Block Level Resource Person entails a) Keeping track of the disabled children in the block; b) Keeping in touch with the teachers about teaching strategies; c) surveying to identify the children with disabilities, etc. Their work is positioned on a tripod of disproportionate workload, dearth of job prestige, and extremely low salaries.

However, supporting home education rather than increasing the accessibility and inclusion of classrooms with the help of additional support needs raises questions as to whether the education system feels that some children with disabilities do not deserve to be included. Although referenced disabled students, as defined in section 2 (r) of the RPwD Act, may have the opportunity to study from home, the classroom environment can be invigorating.

Special Schools

NEP, 2020 in line with RPwD Act, embraces special schools as a viable alternative to regular schools for children with benchmark disabilities. Nonetheless, the new policy does not explicitly mention if the special schools will come under the Ministry of Social Justice or will be treated as regular schools under the Ministry of Education. Further, there are no concrete guidelines that have been framed or mentioned under the policy with regards to the quality, certification, or curriculum of these special schools. A little flexibility is always appreciable; however, the complete dearth of these guidelines hints towards the lackadaisical approach of the policymakers.

The New policy also advocates for the standardization of the Indian Sign Language for teaching deaf children; however, it is unsettled if it will be applied to the schools dedicated specially for deaf children, where the means of speech therapy and lip-reading are preferred to sign language while teaching them. In light of the foregoing reasons, it would not be a far-fetched conclusion to state that the policy framework does not adequately provide for the regulation of these special schools for disabled children let alone paving the way for an inclusive space. These shortcomings in the NEP, in fact, further the idea of having only regular schools as the “vibrant institutions of excellence”.

Special Teachers

NEP, 2020 mentions the urgent requirement for the additional number of special teachers for children with disabilities. However, it fails to address the reasons behind

the meager number of appointments. Special teachers are encumbered with the problems like shortage of funds, delay in receiving remuneration, and unsuitable working conditions. Solutions to the existing foundational problems like delay in disbursement of salary and unsuitable working conditions are not covered in the document. The policy just mentions that special teachers would be recruited with cross-disability training without any elucidation on if there would be any specialized institutions for their training, or cross-disability training would be taken as just any other module in the training course. The policy should have provided for maintaining a separate cadre of special teachers for children with multiple disabilities with their exhaustive training and sufficient emoluments so that there would not be any want of special teachers for children with multiple disabilities.

The process of renewal of ‘Continuous Rehabilitation Education (CRE)’ certification from the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which is to be renewed once every five years after obtaining a hundred points through many training sessions, can be both expensive and cumbersome for the special educators due to the “residential form of training sessions, limited seats, and geographical locations”. This disproportionate workload accompanied by out-of-pocket expenditures disincentivizes this job.

Unfortunately, the existing policy does not appear to address this issue by providing a feasible way of certification and license renewal so that they can contribute to a child's overall development without additional effort and financial burden. Another point where the policy has not arrived is “the regularization of special educators as teachers”. Special educators should be treated “on an equal footing” to regular teachers and should receive similar pay and working conditions. “Inclusion” must be considered not only in the education of children with disabilities, but also in the treatment of special educators who facilitate this same inclusion.

Social and Economic Infrastructure

NEP promises inclusive education by providing the infrastructural barriers from ‘preprimary school to Grade 12’ across every school. It has also proposed the creation of a school complex, where there would be the pooling of resources through establishing a cluster of some secondary and primary schools within a small region (5–10-kilometer radius). However, the concern with this model is that it might have an unwanted consequence of segregation or exclusion, where children with disabilities would be taught separately in a separate classroom or special school. The creation of a digital repository of resources known as ‘Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA)’ would also increase the access to learning resources for children with disabilities through assistive technological aids. Nevertheless, it should be realized that the optimum utilization of these resources by the target section is incomplete until they are completely aware of it, and have the requisite technological devices for its access. The document is silent on how it will be ensured that even a child with disabilities, living in a village, would reap the benefits of digital learning with the lack of resources and awareness on the part of their parents. It mentions that ensuring the inclusion and participation of children with disabilities would be the highest priority without much elucidation on how it would make children with disabilities reaps the benefits of innovative learning.

Curriculum and Assessment

NEP, 2020 aims to achieve 'foundational literacy and numeracy' (FLN) for 'all students by grade 3' as it has been found out that students are not able to understand 'grade-level texts'. These findings are also reiterated in various governmental and non-governmental surveys. However, the concern with many surveys is the non-inclusion of children with disabilities. For instance, in the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER), which has highlighted the learning crisis in the foundational learning of the children, unfortunately, data related to the children with disabilities are not covered in these surveys due to resource constraints and time limitation. An equitable form of assessment catering to the needs of diverse sections of children is proposed to be formulated by the National Assessment Centre: PARAKH. The guidelines for the assessment of children with learning difficulties will also be released by PARAKH. This highlights the ambiguity brought about by the drafting whether children with learning difficulties would encompass both children with intellectual disabilities and cognitive disabilities though they are different. Another concern is the assessment standard of FLN where children might get labelled as learning disabled or get recommended for special education' on their poor performance.

Teachers Training Programmes

NEP states that teachers would be trained in 'most recent techniques in pedagogy', however nowhere has it been mentioned how teachers would be trained to identify children with intellectual and other cognitive disabilities at the foundation learning stage. Including a training module on how to deal with children with intellectual or cognitive disabilities in the B.Ed. the course has not fledged the desired benefits so far as many of the children are left unidentified in their formative years.

Educating Children on Disability

NEP has missed an opportunity on the introduction of 'disability education' for every child so that disability can be seen as one of the different layers of identity. This would have realized the human rights model in letter and spirit as envisaged under the UNCRPD. The issue is essential for establishing an inclusive society to change the stereotype and stigma about disability that persists in society. Though this education policy has emphasized issues like gender sensitization, inclusive education could have compounded with an introduction of disability education in the curriculum.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy, while ambitious in its vision, describes the superficial understanding of basic realities. The use of different terminology such as "inclusion, integration, children with special needs, with different abilities" gives the most eloquent expression to the inconsistent understanding of disability in society. In addition, the review of quality-based higher education within the national education policy is carried out by introducing a philanthropic private education model. The implementation of the disability reserve in government institutions and government-assisted institutions is always in doubt. However, the arrival of private actors in higher education would have serious implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education. To create an

inclusive and equitable society, the government and other authorities should focus more on budgeting for disability education, improve the working conditions of teachers and special educators, remove the barriers to attitudes and stereotypes about disability and take steps to attract more people with disabilities into the mainstream of society. Only then will the goal of an inclusive and fair society be achieved.

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