

BRIEF REPORTS

Zero Rejection Policy in Admission of Children with Special Needs – Myth or Reality

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To study the difficulties (if any) faced in the admission process of Children With Special Needs (CWSN) and the reason for these difficulties (if any) and also to suggest possible solutions for overcoming the difficulties.

Methods: The data was collected from 16 resource teachers working in Delhi. The anecdotal narratives provided by resource teachers were qualitatively analyzed via content shifting.

Results: Majority (more than 80%) of the resource teachers faced lot of difficulties while acting as facilitator for admission of CWSN.

Conclusion: Existing lack of awareness about the zero rejection policy by the school authorities (principal/head teacher), fear of accidents in the school, bullying of CWSN by non-CWSN, non-availability of resource teacher and the required support, were found to be the main challenges in implementation of zero rejection policy in admission of CWSN. The possible solution lies in preparing the regular teachers for addressing the needs of CWSN in the inclusive classroom and in turn making them responsible and accountable for teaching learning of CWSN, just like they are for children without special needs.

Key Words: CWSN admission, inclusive school, admission policy

INTRODUCTION

The Right to Education (RTE) for every child up to 14 years of age, without discrimination, is enshrined in the Constitution of India (Government of India, 1948). The RTE Act (Government of India, 2009) defines many aspects of education such as the role of the teacher, pupil-teacher ratio, school and its infrastructure, etc., apart from making free and compulsory education the right

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of every child. Indian Government's commitment to educate Children With Special Needs (CWSN) is also evident from schemes like Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) and also being signatory to United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Policy Directives, Provisions and Schemes regarding Issue of Admission to Children with Special Needs

In India, the Persons with Disabilities Act (Government of India, 1995), section 26, advises local authorities and appropriate governments to ensure that every child with disability has access to free education in an appropriate environment till the age of eighteen years. Section 30 of the same Act advocates provision for removal of architectural barriers from school/college, supply of books, uniforms and other essentials, scholarships to children with special needs, and restructuring of curriculum for these children. More than a decade later, RTE Act 2009, made free education a legal right for all children without any discrimination. The Persons with Disabilities Act was revised in 2016.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), a pan India scheme initiated in 2000 for universalisation of elementary education, adopted a zero rejection policy in education. Various states in India had formulated their own admission guidelines under SSA. Guidelines formulated in Haryana suggest that every identified child with special needs, in the age group of 6 - 18 years, shall be enrolled in the neighbourhood schools without any discrimination. Every child with special needs shall be enrolled in classes according to their age. No child shall be denied admission in school due to the absence of required documents. They shall be enrolled throughout the academic year (Guidelines Haryana, 2015). Madhya Pradesh initiated ICT- based tracking of assistance, provided to CWSN, to ensure personalised follow up (Madhya Pradesh Education Portal, n.d.). Office of the SSA Karnataka had drafted a policy on education of CWSN in the year 2013, ensuring no discrimination in admission for CWSN and other children belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), minorities, girls and other disadvantaged conditions (Draft policy, Education of CWSN, Karnataka, 2013).

The Delhi High Court in its landmark judgment directed the state government to develop an admission and reporting mechanism for admission of CWSN at entry level in schools. The admissions were to be routed through a single window clearance centre, without any need to run from pillar to post (Order Hon'ble High

Court, 2014). Following directives of the Delhi High Court, the Delhi Government made provision for CWSN to seek admission in any five schools of their choice, by filling up a common admission form available on the website of the Directorate of Education. The filled in application forms were to be later transferred online to the private schools that had been applied to, and to the nodal officer. The school, after taking the necessary steps, need to convey the result to both the parent and the Directorate. Non-compliance would lead to stringent action (Sharma, 2015)

In 2009, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a circular to its affiliated schools to ensure that no child with special needs is denied admission in the regular schools. In addition, the schools were advised to allow parents, when they make a request, to provide an aide so that individual attention is possible for the child and the student is enabled to grow and learn along with other peers in the class. The schools were cautioned that failing to provide attention to a child with special needs or denying admission to CWSN due to their disability, will be liable to stringent action, even to the extent of disaffiliation (Government of India, 2009).

The Indian Government's commitment to educate children with special needs is also evident from schemes like Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS), and by virtue of being a signatory to United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Rationale for Present Study

The SSA enrolment data indicates encouraging trends regarding enrolment of CWSN in regular schools. The enrolment of CWSN has gone up from 1.17 million in 2003-04 to 2.35 million (86.45% of identified CWSN) in 2013-14. In addition, 33,900 CWSN were enrolled in school readiness programmes and 206,000 children were provided home-based education. The total coverage of CWSN is 2.6 million, which is 95.3% of the total number of identified CWSN (EFA, NUEPA, MHRD, 2014).

The Census 2011 reveals that the percentage of persons with disabilities increased from 2.13 % in 2001 to 2.21% in 2011. Of this 2.21% population of persons with disabilities, 1.14% was in the age group 0 - 4 years (early years), 1.54% in the age group 5 - 9 years (primary school age) and 1.82 % in the age group 10 - 19 years (Census, 2011).

SSA school statistics show that the joint efforts made by SSA and RTE Act 2009 towards universalization of elementary education have been a success. However,

the researcher worked as teacher educator and resource teacher for in-service teacher training programmes under SSA and found through experience that the situation was quite different. The number of CWSN enrolled in the schools is still below the national average of this population of children.

The aim of the present study therefore was to discover the difficulties (if any) faced by resource/special teachers in the admission process of CWSN and the reason for these difficulties (if any), as well as suggest possible solutions to overcome them. This could improve the admission scenario for CWSN in regular schools.

METHOD

Design

The survey mode, with open ended items, was used to gather data.

Sample

Data was collected from 16 resource teachers working under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) scheme in Delhi. The anecdotal narratives provided by these teachers was qualitatively analysed via content shifting.

Narrative received from special educators	=	16
CWSN mentioned in narratives	=	26
Principals in the narratives	=	22

Table 1: Nature of Children with Special Needs, as mentioned in narratives

S. No.	Special Needs due to	Number of CWSN
1	Mental Illness	4
2	Intellectual disability	4
3	Visual Impairments	3
4	Autism	2
5	Multiple Disabilities	2
6	Physical Handicap	2
7	Others	9

Data Analysis and Inferences

The narratives of the special teachers were qualitatively analysed and content was sifted in terms of: identifying the school principal's initial reaction when parents, with the support of special teachers, approached the school for admission of children with special needs; reasons for refusal given by principals; counselling of parents; nature of undertaking; pressure strategies adopted by special teachers; and, the supportive principals. The paragraphs and Tables below present the inferences drawn on each theme.

Table 2: Initial Reaction of School Principals, as mentioned in narratives

S. No.	Reaction of School Principal	Frequency
1	Refusal	17 (77%)
2	Yes	5 (22%)
3	Foul Language	2(9.1%)
4	Anger	2(9.1%)

According to the narratives of the special educators, refusal of admission was the initial reaction of majority (77%) of the school principals, 22% said 'yes' to admission, around 9% used foul language and 9% expressed anger at the special teacher who was supporting admission of children with special needs in regular schools and helping parents in the process. The reaction of majority of the principals was not in harmony with the policies, acts and provisions provided by the Government. This was also contrary to the CBSE admission guidelines and zero rejection policy adopted in the SSA.

Table 3: Reasons for Refusal given by Principals, as mentioned in narratives

S. No.	Reason for Refusal given by Principal	Frequency (percentage calculated from 17)
1	Lack of Special Teacher	8 (47%)
2	Who will take responsibility?	5(29.4%)
3	CWSN will be bullied by other kids	3 (17.6%)
4	Non-availability of disability certificate	3(17.6%)
5	Busy in other work, come tomorrow	2 (11.8%)
6	Age more than 5 years	1 (5.8%)
7	Last date of admission is over	1(5.8%)

8	CWSN roam around in the school	1(5.8%)
9	Lack skilled resources to teach CWSN	1(5.8%)
10	Admission in-charge not available	1
11	Negative attitude of other teachers	1
12	No seat available	1
13	Registration now, admission later	1
14	Cannot shift respective classroom from upper floor to ground	1
15	File is sent for approval	1
16	Get admission to special school	1

The Table above lists the reasons stated by the school principals, as mentioned in the narratives, for denying admission to CWSN in their schools. Lack of special teachers was the main reason for denying admission to CWSN, as reported by majority (47%) of the school principals. Some of the other reasons given by principals for denying admission were: Who will take responsibility? (29.4%), CWSN will be bullied by other children (17.6%), and lack of disability certificate (17.6%).

Counselling of Parents

A few school principals also attempted to discuss the issue with the parents, in the hope of convincing them not to admit their children with special needs in the school. The interaction between the principals and the parents revolved around the following themes, as culled from the narratives:

- The children without disability studying in the school will hit your child, we will not be able to provide due care, due to other work.
- Please give in writing that you do not want your child to be admitted here.
- This is requested for your own good and benefit to your child.
- If your child doesn't understand what is being taught or done in the school, then his/her time spent in the school would be wasted.
- If it were our own child, we would get him/her admitted in a special school.
- Why do you keep coming to school and waste both your time and ours?
- What if the child is physically abused?

When authority- in this case, the school principal - clearly advises against admission, the economically backward and illiterate parents are hardly in a position to object. However, thanks to persistent efforts of some special teachers, a few school principals agreed to give admission, with an undertaking from the parents.

Table 4: Nature of Undertaking from the Parents

S. No.	Nature of Undertaking	Frequency
1	In case of any accidents or unfortunate event, school will not be held responsible	8
2	One of the parents will have to accompany the child to school	4
3	Child will not be sent to school till appointment of special educator	2
4	Special teacher will be completely responsible for all issues	1
5	School will not be responsible for difficulty faced by the child in school	1

The undertaking, regarding any unfortunate event or accidents, given by the parents indicates the assumption by the school authorities that CWSN are more prone to accidents and injuries as compared to their peers without disabilities. The same kind of undertaking is rarely requested from the parents of children without special needs. This is against the spirit of the Constitution of India (Government of India, 1948) ensuring no discrimination via Article 15 which prohibits discrimination on any grounds. Article 15(1) enjoins on the Government not to discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

By asking parents of CWSN to accompany their child to school, the principals are not only discriminating between children on the basis of disability (violation of Constitution Article 15) but have also found a polite way to refuse them admission, as most of the parents who send their children to state-run schools belong to the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder and have minimal or no knowledge of their rights or legal provisions. The family's difficulties will be compounded further if one of the parents is forced to accompany the child to school and spends a lot of time trying to get the child admitted, thereby losing out on a working day's wages and halving the family's income.

Pressure Strategies adopted by Special Teachers

In the narratives, the special teachers have mentioned that more than often they have to draw support from the policy, provisions and Acts, various circulars issued by the state SSA offices, or bring the matter to the notice of higher authorities, in order to succeed.

Table 5: Strategies adopted by Special Teachers

S. No.	Strategy adopted by Special Teacher	Frequency (out of 16)
1	Involved higher officials like DDE, BRCC, etc.	2
2	Quoted/showed RTE Act	2
3	Written complaint with parents support	2
4	Examples from neighbouring schools	1
5	Referred to SSA circulars	1
6	Threatened to file written complaint	1

Not every special teacher voluntarily adopted these pressure tactics. During the household survey, many parents refused to give the name of their child as they had been through bad experiences earlier. They felt this was only eyewash, one of the routine tasks to be completed by the education system, without actually having any will to admit the CWSN in the schools. This was also mentioned in one of the narratives.

When the system is not geared to provide support and the policy or practice implementation is imposed from above, without proper checks and balances in place, the implementing officer may become frustrated. This is the situation in the SSA. The state offices initiate the admission drive for CWSN and involve the special educators. However, the intermediate authorities, namely the school principals, attempt to find a way out of implementing the initiatives, and the special educators end up frustrated.

The Other Side of the Coin: The Supportive Principals

A few school principals not only welcomed the parents and the CWSN, but had also extended cooperation to parents and special teachers. These school principals had expressed readiness to accommodate more CWSN in their institutions. They

also shared their knowledge about the provisions for CWSN under SSA and RTE, with the parents.

Ironically, one school principal who also happened to be a person with disability was mentioned as one of the non-cooperative principals in the narratives.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The data analysis indicated that majority (more than 80 %) of the special teachers faced lot of difficulties while acting as facilitator for admission of CWSN.

Suggestions

The possible solution lies in preparing the regular teachers to address the needs of these children in the inclusive classroom, and in making them responsible and accountable for the progress of CWSN, as they are for children without special needs.

- There should be a mechanism to address the grievances of special teachers and the parents.
- The procedures for obtaining the disability certificate should be simplified.
- Dedicated programmes targeting awareness-building and skills enhancement for parents.
- Dedicated programmes aiming to enhance sensitivity, leadership and knowledge for principals and other educational administrators.
- Situation-based, focussed attempts to build positive attitudes among teachers, educational administrators and peers of CWSN.
- Attempt should be made to reestablish the faith of parents in the system.
- The field functionaries like special teachers should be provided hand-holding and a support mechanism to perform their expected duties without fear, anxiety and frustration.
- The skills of regular teachers should be enhanced to address the teaching-learning needs of all, including CWSN in inclusive settings.
- The prime responsibility for teaching-learning of CWSN should devolve on the regular teachers, and they should be accountable just like they are for teaching-learning of children without disabilities.
- Roles and responsibilities of regular and special teachers should be clearly spelt out and conveyed to them.

CONCLUSION

At present, the educational administrators like the principals of regular schools, require sensitisation and awareness-training to facilitate admission of CWSN in neighbourhood schools. The objections raised resulted from lack of awareness by the school authorities (principal/head teacher) about the zero rejection policy, fear of accidents in the school, bullying of children with special needs by their peers, non-availability of resource teachers and the required support, etc. The regular teachers should be empowered to address the learning needs of CWSN in inclusive settings, and should be made accountable and responsible for their progress.

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