School Readiness for Inclusive Education in Tripura, India

Sujata Bhan[1], Apoorva Panshikar[1]
1. Department of Special Education, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, India

ABSTRACT

Purpose: *There is an increasing emphasis on inclusive education in the Indian educational context. While efforts are being made to bring children from varied marginalised sections into the fold of inclusive classrooms, inclusion of children with disability is of crucial importance too. The present study attempted to find out whether schools in India's North-eastern state of Tripura are ready for inclusive education in its true sense.*

Method: *Sixty schools from eight districts of Tripura were identified through systematic random sampling technique. Data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews with the headmasters/headmistresses and teachers, and analysed along with observations of the physical infrastructure of the schools in the study.*

Results*: The physical infrastructure of the schools was far from ideal. Headmasters/ headmistresses and teachers appeared to lack the required knowledge and skills that would make inclusive education possible. There was also shortage of funds needed to make the necessary adaptations.*

Conclusion: *The schools in Tripura have to build school readiness for inclusive education. Sensitisation of the headmasters/headmistresses about the capabilities and needs of children with disabilities, capacity building of teachers and concerted efforts to make the school infrastructure exemplary in all respects, are required.*

Key words: *inclusive education, India, school readiness*

INTRODUCTION

About 80% of the Indian population lives in rural areas that have no provision for special schools. There are an estimated 8 million children out of school in

* **Corresponding Author:** Sujata Bhan, Professor and Head, Department of Special Education, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, India, email: bhansujata@gmail.com

India (Ministry of Human Resource and Development, 2009 statistics), many of whom are marginalised by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. There has been an approximately 16% increase in the number of children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream primary schools over the last five years, but the children with disabilities are most likely to be excluded. "Even amongst those who are enrolled, many children with disabilities are most likely to drop out before completing five years of primary schooling and are least likely to transition to secondary school or higher education," according to Singal (2017). There is a need to do more to ensure that children with disabilities not only access education, but also benefit from quality education.

According to a 2019 report by the United Nations - State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities - 75% of children with disabilities in India do not attend any educational institute in their lifetime. This is despite the existence of a seemingly comprehensive policy on education with provisions to make the Indian education system inclusive. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD), defines inclusive education as a "system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities". The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, n.d.) reaffirms the provisions in the RPWD Act regarding inclusive education. The policy takes on a broader inclusion perspective and aims to achieve learning for all, particularly addressing the exclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The policy emphasises the importance of inclusion of children with disabilities from early childhood education to higher education, with the provision of assistive devices and teaching and learning materials.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan is India's flagship education programme implemented throughout the country through a single State Implementation Society at the state/union territory level. It subsumes three previous schemes: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and Teacher Education (Ministry of Education, Government of of India, n.d.). These schemes are the primary strategies of the country to move towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) targets (Ministry of Education, Government of India, n.d.). Inclusive education is among the major interventions identified under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan.

Are our schools ready for inclusion? What are the needs and challenges for achieving the goal of inclusive education? How will an inclusive environment meet the needs of children with disabilities? How can quality education be effectively and efficiently delivered for all children? Inclusive schools have to address the needs of all children in every community and the central and state governments have to manage inclusive classrooms. How does one build a common understanding and a renewed commitment towards reinforcing inclusion in education among education policymakers, education practitioners, civil society organisations, NGOs, a mechanism to remind states of their obligation to all people?

Keeping in view these questions, a study was undertaken by the researchers for CBM India Trust to analyse the current status of the inclusive education system in the state of Tripura by converging data from three sources, viz., physical infrastructure of the school, the views of headmasters/headmistresses of the schools towards inclusive education, and the regular teachers' readiness for inclusive education.

Tripura is a state in the north-eastern region of India, with a population of nearly 42.23 lakhs and with a literacy rate of 87.22 % (Population census, n.d.). The state of Tripura imparts free and compulsory education to children between 6 and 14 years of age (Government of Tripura, n.d.) as per the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, passed by the Government of India (Government of India, n.d.). The school education system in Tripura has four stages – primary stage (classes I to V), middle stage (classes VI to VIII), secondary stage (classes IX and X) and higher secondary stage (classes XI and XII). The state has schools that are affiliated to one of the three boards - the Tripura Board of Secondary Education, or the Central Board of Secondary Education or the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination. The schools are either run by the government or by private bodies. The schools in Tripura generally have Bengali and English as the medium of instruction, though Kokborok and other dialects are also used for instruction (Majumder, 2020). In the context of education of children with disabilities, the Rights of People with Disabilities Act (2016) mandates that every child with disability receives free education in an appropriate environment in an inclusive school or special school as per his/her choice, and the state of Tripura follows the diktat.

Objective

This study attempts to answer three research questions:

(1) In what ways is the school accessible for children with disabilities?

(2) According to the headmasters/headmistresses, in what ways is their school ready for inclusive education?

(3) What are the perspectives of the regular teachers towards inclusive education for children with disabilities?

METHOD

Study Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed to help interpret the findings.

Study Setting

The study particularly focused on 400 government schools in the state of Tripura in Northeast India, where the Saksham Tripura Project is being implemented. This is a state- funded project managed by CBM India Trust. Four partnering agencies have collaborated and employed 100 special educators and 6 mentors to support children with disabilities studying in the 400 government schools.

Study Sample

Permission to collect data from the schools, the headmasters/headmistresses (HMs), and the regular teachers was sought from the Director, Directorate of Secondary Education, Government of Tripura, India. Once the permissions were obtained, the process of sample selection commenced. Systematic random sampling technique was employed to identify 15% of the 400 schools for inclusion in the study and thus 60 schools from eight districts of Tripura were a part of the sample. The HMs of the selected 60 schools were included in the study. In some schools, teachers-in-charge were working as HMs, thus were part of the sample. Eighty regular teachers who had students with disability in their class comprised the sample.

Study Tools

The study included the use of three different tools for data collection from three sources, viz., physical infrastructure, HMs, and regular teachers.

Rating scale to assess physical accessibility of schools: A 3-point rating scale was constructed to evaluate the school readiness vis-á-vis its physical accessibility. The constructed tool was drawn from 'Indicators for Physical Accessibility', developed as part of the Index for inclusive schools by National Council of Educational Research and Training (n.d.). The physical accessibility and infrastructure of the school was rated as having 'exemplary level of work', 'partial work', or 'needs improvement'.

Questions for focus group discussion (FGD) and interview schedule for HMs: The tool for FGD (and the interview schedule) comprised questions for eliciting data in four areas – planning for inclusion, inclusive culture, building capacities, inclusive practice, and feasibility of inclusive education. In addition, there were introductory and concluding questions.

Rating scale for regular teachers: To know the perceptions of regular teachers regarding readiness for inclusive education, a 4-point Likert-type rating scale was employed.

Data Collection

The process of data collection started with development of tools and content validating them. The tools that were developed in English language were further translated into Bengali language to facilitate data collection. The Bengali tools were then back translated to confirm that they did not lose their meaning.

The field-workers comprising of six mentors and 60 special educators of the Saksham Tripura Project were introduced to their roles in data collection, familiarised with the tools, and trained in the administration of the same. Furthermore, a three-hour online training in data collection was also conducted for the field-workers using the Google Meet platform. The field-workers visited the schools that were identified for data collection and gathered data by recording the observations (for physical accessibility) and responses of the regular teachers, in Google Forms. The FGDs and interviews of the HMs were conducted by the researchers initially; later, the mentors interviewed the HMs. The qualitative data from the FGDs and interviews was transcribed and then subjected to qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

The study aimed at understanding whether the schools in Tripura were ready for inclusive education. The data obtained from the observation of physical infrastructure of the schools, the perspectives of the HMs and the regular teachers was analysed. The results are presented below.

Physical Infrastructure of Schools

The accessibility of school infrastructure is the first and foremost parameter under consideration for evaluating the success of inclusive education. For the study, observations were made about the infrastructure of 54 out of the 60 identified schools, and were noted under three categories: infrastructure needing improvement, having partial work, and having exemplary work. For the tool, the item was marked under 'needs improvement' if a lot of work needed to be initiated; or marked as 'partial work' if there was development but the physical infrastructure could be further improved; or 'exemplary level of work' if nothing more needed to be improved and the infrastructure was exemplary. Data obtained from the rating scales and observations were considered while making inferences about the infrastructural accessibility.

Table 1: Percentage of Responses about Physical Infrastructure and Accessibility of Schools in Tripura

Sr. No.	Item	Needs improvement (%)	Partial work (%)	Exemplary level of work (%)
	The school…			
1.	Is safe and fully accessible to all children including children with special needs and has appropriate electrical and water supply	29.63	33.33	37.04
2.	Has doors with handles fixed at adequate levels and not too high	12.96	22.22	64.81
3.	Has toilets with proper doors, taking care of privacy, especially for girls and children who need help in toileting	25.93	33.33	40.74
4.	Has separate toilets for boys and girls, built at a distance from each other and an adapted toilet for children with special needs	31.48	18.52	50.00
5.	Has toilets with constant running water and sanitation facilities	29.63	27.78	42.59

6.	Has ramps and railings for children who may have difficulty in moving	29.63	40.74	29.63
7.	Has a library equipped with good storage space and books in accessible formats and ICT	61.11	25.93	12.96
8.	Has a resource room or separate room for additional teaching if required	59.26	22.22	18.52
9.	Has a playground with adequate equipment for outdoor games and physical activities for all, including children with special needs	18.52	33.33	48.19
10.	Has a provision for indoor games such as carrom, chess, etc.	27.78	35.18	37.04
	The classroom			
11.	Setting allows children to move freely or sit with a friend when required	7.41	44.44	48.15
12.	Is of adequate size for proper seating arrangements and group work	14.81	50.00	31.48
13.	Blackboards are fixed at a proper height to be accessible to all children, including those who want to come near to read it	9.26	29.63	61.11
14.	Has adequate light and extra light when necessary, and proper colour contrast	31.48	35.19	33.33
15.	Has minimum noise levels for avoiding distraction	29.63	31.48	38.89
16.	Is equipped with adequate space for keeping books in Braille/ Large Print/ Print and assistive devices that help children with special needs to perform various tasks	79.63	14.81	5.56
17.	Has provision for ground floor classrooms for children with mobility needs, and flexible and adjustable furniture	38.89	40.74	20.37

Table 1 shows that 37.04% of the schools were fully accessible with appropriate electrical and water supply. The other 62.96% lacked one or the other aspect. A large percentage (64.81%) of schools had door handles at the height of around two to two- and- a- half feet that could be accessed by children. The toilets that were constructed offered complete privacy to girl students and students with disability in 40.74% of the schools. Separate toilets were available for boys, girls, and children with disabilities in 50% of the schools. Nonetheless, the toilets were found to be incompatible with the specifications for accessible toilets as required for children with disabilities. Ramps for access to toilets were unavailable in many cases. Western commodes, handrails, hand water faucets, and large space to

manoeuvre the wheelchair were missing in the toilets for children with disabilities. The toilets required continuous water supply in 57.41% of schools. There was a need for more and better ramps and railings in 40.74% of schools, with just 29.63% having 'exemplary level of work' in this respect. Though ample physical space was available for outdoor activities and games in nearly half the schools (48.19%), the provision for indoor games was seen in only 37.04% of schools. The physical infrastructure for library with accessible material needed improvement in 61.11% of schools and separate resource rooms for special educators to work with children with disabilities were required in 59.26% of schools.

With regard to the classroom infrastructure, the classrooms were found to have sufficient space for movement of students. In 48.15% of cases, the rooms were spacious enough to permit children with disabilities who were wheelchair-users to navigate within the class. In 61.11% of the classrooms, the blackboards were observed to be at an appropriate height for all children to write on. Many school buildings were single ground-floor buildings, yet only 20.37% of the schools had a provision for arranging classrooms on the ground floor for children with mobility needs. Additionally, the furniture in the classrooms was not flexible and adjustable, reducing the movement of children with locomotor disability. Barely 20.37% of schools were able to provide for this flexibility in classroom arrangement. Close to 80% (79.63%) of the classrooms lacked the space to store assistive technology and resource material required by children with disabilities, which would help them access educational opportunities and engage in productive learning. The classrooms in 38.89% of schools were near noise-free. However, with respect to appropriate lighting and contrast, there was an approximately equal percentage of schools needing improvement (31.48%), having partial work (35.19%), and with exemplary lighting and contrast (33.33%).

Perspectives of Headmasters and Headmistresses (HMs)

The responses of 59 headmasters/headmistresses were collected and analysed. Initially, three different focus group discussions were carried out with 23 HMs, placing eight HMs in group 1, eight in group 2, and seven in group 3. It was observed that some HMs were hesitant about sharing their views on practices and challenges in implementing inclusive education during the FGDs. Secondly, due to the geographical distance, it was rather difficult to coordinate with and gather all the HMs to meet at a mutually convenient time for conducting the focus group discussion. Hence, the remaining 36 HMs were interviewed on a

one-to-one basis. During the interviews, the HMs were more willing to speak and share information, and also respond to the prompts and probes.

The questions addressed criteria, viz., planning for inclusion, building capacities, inclusive culture, inclusive practices, and inclusion feasibility to determine how ready the HMs were to bring in a change in the education system at their level, to make schools ready for inclusive education.

When asked whether they thought that their school was ready for inclusion, 80 % of the HMs responded in the affirmative. However, the in-depth interviews had a different story to tell. After reviewing the interview responses, what emerged was clubbed under 'their perception', 'the reality' and 'the challenges faced'.

Planning for Inclusion

Thirty-five out of 42 HMs were not doing any specific planning to make their schools inclusive. One major perception held by the HMs that emerged from the FGDs and interviews was that not much planning was required for inclusion of children with locomotor disabilities. Talking about the challenges in planning for inclusion, the lack of parental involvement at the planning stage of their child's education came across strongly. They also expressed the view that financial resources were needed to plan for inclusion so that inclusive education could become a reality. Lack of funds was one of the major challenges that most of them were facing. They indicated that the state government provided transport allowance, escort allowance and money to purchase teaching- learning material for children with disabilities. Nonetheless, the reality was that this allowance was provided on a rotational basis, so every child with disabilities did not get the allowance every year. The schools did not have enough finance to construct a resource room for children with disabilities. Thus, many HMs regretted that the state government funding was inadequate.

Building Capacities

All HMs and teachers should understand why inclusive education needs to be practised and how all children, including those with disabilities, must be taught without pulling them out of their classroom. When asked if they would want to undergo any professional development training with a focus on learning about inclusive education, the response from most HMs was not very encouraging. More than 75% of them were not interested in any training to understand the

need for inclusive education and how it could be implemented. Having enquired whether the teachers in their schools have received adequate training in inclusive pedagogies, 20 HMs responded in the negative; those who said that the teachers had received training clarified that the training was organised and conducted by the government, and it was of short duration of five days.

Inclusive Culture

The perception of the HMs was that every child had a right to quality education, but the reality was far from it. There was no policy document on inclusive education created by any HM. They were not aware of the milestone laws and policies of the Indian government which focus on rights of children with disabilities pertaining to their education and rehabilitation. Focus group discussions revealed that there was little empathy towards children with disabilities. There were no guidelines for the HMs on implementing inclusive education. They were aware that as per the RTE Act they could not deny admission to any child with disability, but there was little planning done to make it equal and equitable education. The common perception of the HMs was that children who have mild disabilities and no cognitive deficits were capable of studying in mainstream schools. Those with milder disabilities were accommodated but no adaptations were made in the curriculum or in sports, etc., that would allow all children with disabilities to develop a sense of belonging in the school.

Despite the lack of positive attitude of the HMs, special teachers were appointed in the schools under the Saksham Tripura Project, and they were trying hard to make a difference in the education of children with disabilities. The onus was put on the special teachers most of the time and thus a holistic approach in educating children with disabilities was missing.

Inclusive Practices

Clear, open, honest, and timely communication among school leaders and staff, staff and students, staff and families, and between students, is vital to an inclusive and positive school climate. Seventy-one percent of HMs believed that there should be adaptations made in curriculum and curriculum transaction for children with disabilities; and as indicated by them the adaptation was done in the process of teaching, the time allocated to the children with disabilities, the content, and the teaching-learning material. In reality, these adaptations in the curriculum were done by the special teachers when they taught the children with

disabilities in resource rooms; but the same teaching practices were not followed by the regular teachers.

Inclusion Feasibility

A child with disability is like any other child. When this becomes a common perception, inclusive education will become a reality. All the HMs (100%) agreed that inclusive education could be feasible but only if there was awareness and involvement of all stakeholders, and if adequate funds were available.

Regular Teachers' Perceptions

Data collected from the 79 regular teachers on a 4-point rating scale and anecdotal recording of the oral-verbal interactions with them provided some insights into their perceptions about inclusive education. Table 2 presents the percentage of responses obtained from the regular teachers on the 4-point rating scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' (SA), 'agree' (A), 'disagree' (D), and 'strongly disagree' (SD)

The percentage of regular teachers indicating that they had no training in teaching children with disabilities was 64.55%, as compared to 35.45% indicating that they had the necessary knowledge and skills. A majority of teachers (87.34%) felt that they needed more training to teach children with disabilities appropriately.

Regarding awareness of inclusive pedagogies, more than half (53.16%) of the teachers responded in the affirmative. However, on asking them to name such methods, the teachers could neither list inclusive pedagogies like differentiated instruction or universal design for learning, nor describe any pedagogy that reaches all students in class.

Table 2: Percentage of Responses by Regular Teachers

Sr. No.	Item	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1	My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach children with disabilities	2.53	32.91	35.44	29.11
2	I am aware of different pedagogical approaches to be followed in regular classroom / inclusive classroom	7.59	45.57	32.91	13.92
3	Implementation of inclusive education is possible when general education teachers and special education teachers work together	46.84	43.04	6.33	3.80

4	Methods and materials used to teach children with disabilities will also benefit all other students in the regular classroom	45.57	45.57	5.06	3.80
5	Both regular education teachers and special education teachers should teach children with disabilities	49.37	45.57	2.53	2.53
6	I think I will need much more time to teach children with disabilities in my class	30.38	55.70	12.66	1.27
7	I need more training in order to teach children with disabilities appropriately	41.77	45.57	8.86	3.80
8	I will not be able to complete the syllabus if I am expected to spend time giving individual attention to children with disabilities	31.65	45.57	20.25	2.53
9	Isolation in a special class has a negative effect on the social and emotional development of children with disabilities	32.91	45.57	17.72	3.80
10	I adapt the curriculum for children with disabilities in my class	11.39	39.24	39.24	10.13
11	I discuss my concerns with the special teacher about the children with disabilities in my class	24.05	50.63	20.25	5.06
12	When teaching children with disabilities, I use different teaching methods (e.g., use of concrete aids, multisensory teaching)	8.86	51.90	25.32	13.92
13	It is challenging to manage the behavioural issues of children with disabilities in class (e.g., aggression, temper tantrum, etc.)	12.66	50.63	25.32	11.39
14	All children with disabilities in my class are adequately engaged in class	20.25	59.49	18.99	1.27
15	Inclusion of children with disabilities requires significant change in regular classroom procedures (e.g., changing seating arrangement, changing time-table)	35.44	51.90	8.86	3.80
16	I design such classroom activities that all children including children with disabilities can participate in them	21.52	55.70	20.25	2.53
17	I help children with disabilities to use assistive technology in my class	3.80	41.77	41.77	12.66
18	I prefer to appoint the first ranking student as the class monitor always	6.33	18.99	36.71	37.97
19	Most children with disabilities do not make an adequate attempt to complete their classwork and homework	6.33	35.44	45.57	12.66
20	My school head ensures that children with disabilities can avail of the provisions available to them	41.77	46.84	7.59	3.80

21	Regular education teachers should not be responsible for teaching children with disabilities	7.59	15.19	43.04	34.18
22	The students in my class help children with disabilities in some learning tasks when instructed by me	30.38	62.03	7.59	0.00
23	The inclusion of children with disabilities can be beneficial for students without disability	30.38	53.16	13.92	2.53
24	My school head is supportive of my efforts while working with children with disabilities	41.77	51.90	5.06	1.27
25	I prepare different teaching-learning material depending on the learning needs of children with disabilities	10.13	36.71	40.51	12.66
26	Children with disabilities should be given every opportunity to function in the regular classroom setting wherever possible	45.57	49.37	3.80	1.27
27	Large class size prevents me from giving individual attention to children with disabilities	20.25	43.04	27.85	8.86
28	Children with disabilities and those without disability should learn together cooperatively	35.44	59.49	1.27	3.80
29	The needs of children with disabilities can best be met by special educators in separate classes	30.38	49.37	16.46	3.80
30	Children with disabilities should be allowed to participate in social events held in school	53.16	46.84	0.00	0.00

In principle, shared responsibility and collaboration (item 3 – 89.88%, and item 5 -94.94%) between regular teachers and special educators for education of children with disabilities was acknowledged. However, in practice there was little collaboration between the regular teachers and the special educators as communicated by them. A quarter of the regular teachers (25.31%) had not discussed with the special educators about the children with disabilities, their learning needs, and how to teach them. As seen from Table 2, 77.22% agreed that regular teachers were responsible for teaching children with disabilities. Yet, 79.75% of them felt that children with disabilities could learn best with special educators in separate classes.

The regular teachers shared the concerns and challenges they faced in the process of teaching children with disabilities in the inclusive classrooms. Implementation of inclusive education had its set of perceived challenges like requiring more time to teach children with disabilities (86.08%), syllabus completion concerns

if children with disabilities are attended to (77.22%), management of behaviours of children with disabilities (63.29%), and difficulty paying attention to children with disabilities due to large class size (63.29%). Responses of the regular teachers (87.34%) regarding logistical challenges, like needing to change the timetable / infrastructure to accommodate the children with disabilities, was noted.

Although there was recognition amongst the regular teachers that children with disabilities should be included in the classroom, inclusion in its true spirit was probably not prevalent. When asked whether a child with disabilities would be appointed as a monitor of the class, resistance was observed on the part of the regular teachers. With respect to what the regular teachers do in their classrooms to teach children with disabilities, 50% said that they adapted the curriculum, 60.76% agreed that they used different teaching methods to teach children with disabilities, and nearly 72% indicated that they designed classroom activities so that children with disabilities could be engaged in their classrooms. However, they were able to provide little clarification and illustration for what they claimed they did. According to 83.54% of the regular teachers, inclusive education was beneficial for children without disabilities. Nearly 91.14% responded that the material that is used to teach children with disabilities would also benefit other children in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The study attempted to explore whether the schools in the state of Tripura were ready for inclusive education. To determine this, a study of the physical infrastructure of the schools was undertaken. Additionally, the views of the headmasters/ headmistresses and the regular teachers were elicited and analysed.

The study identified that the schools' physical infrastructure was far from ideal. Though the schools and classrooms were spacious, the built environment posed barriers to physical access and movement for children with locomotor disabilities. The schools that were surveyed showed that they lacked accessibility; many school buildings did not have well-constructed approach roads. The want of ramps, ramps with appropriate gradient, lifts, tactile paths and signage, was reducing school accessibility for children with physical and locomotor disabilities. The schools needed adapted and accessible toilet facilities along with drinking water facility. The physical infrastructure of a school impacts the student learning (Barrett et al, 2019). Barrett et al (2019) found that when the school premises are perceived as safe, clean, and accessible, teachers and students are more likely to attend

the school. In the context of the current study, improvement in infrastructure by incorporating tactile flooring, adequate lighting, and paint schemes to help children with visual impairment; lifts, and ramps to help children with physical impairment; carpeting of classrooms to help children with hearing impairment; accessible restrooms with adequate water supply, and good roads to access school, would facilitate access to education for all. Resource rooms should be an integral part of any inclusive school as it may not be possible to meet all the needs of a special child in the mainstream class (Establishment of Resource Rooms for Children with Special Needs, n.d.). It is alright if the child with disabilities is pulled out of the class to be in the resource room where the special teacher provides him/her additional support through adapted curriculum, variety of teaching-learning materials, assistive devices, and individual attention for some part of the day. As children with disabilities receive more services in the resource room, they may gradually be able to self-regulate their learning and the time spent in the resource room may reduce.

The attitudes towards children with disabilities have a crucial role in the effective implementation of the school inclusion process (Ginevra et al. 2021). The effort that will be put into making education accessible to all students is seen to be an extension of the attitudes of the two key stakeholders in this study – the headmasters/ headmistresses and the regular teachers. The attitude of apathy towards children with disabilities is making the inclusive education efforts in Tripura an uphill task. HMs and teachers appeared to lack the required knowledge and skills that would make inclusive education possible. Thus, there is a need for continuous professional development of the HMs and the teachers to achieve momentum to the inclusive education efforts, as it is widely acknowledged today that teachers need to inculcate the right attitudes, knowledge, and skills to teach all students in inclusive setups (Global Education Monitoring Report Team and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2020).

The HMs lacked knowledge about the various Acts for empowering children with disabilities and the legal provisions pertaining to education of children with disabilities. They not only need to know the rules, regulations, and provisions for children with disabilities, but also how to help children with disabilities avail of the benefits. Apart from the answer to 'why' inclusive education, to answer 'how' is very important, considering that the teacher attitude towards inclusive education is determined by the practicalities of implementing inclusive education (Warnock & Norwich, 2010).The HMs and teachers will feel more confident and

competent about inclusive education once they receive training in the same (Subban & Sharma, 2006).

The study found that the ignorance about inclusive education pedagogy was negatively affecting the implementation of inclusive educational practices. The existing teacher training programmes do not prepare the regular teachers in addressing educational challenges of a class with diverse learners including those with disabilities. While regular teachers were only subject pedagogues, they need training in inclusive pedagogies like curriculum adaptation, universal design for learning, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, differentiated instruction, etc., which would equip them to be effective teachers in mixed ability classrooms and create sustainable inclusive classrooms (Schuelka, 2018).

Teachers are the most important human resources required for developing young children with and without disability to their full potential. In many of the schools from which data was collected, it came to light that a large number of teacher posts were vacant for a long period of time. In effect, the existing teachers were taking on additional responsibilities in the school. The teacher-student ratio was thus skewed; this in turn was affecting the teaching-learning process adversely (Limaye, 2016). The regular teachers indicated that the average student strength in class was 30 students. With a large student-teacher ratio, it was highly challenging for them to pay attention to the needs of children with disabilities studying in their class, proving to be a deterrent to teacher efforts towards inclusive education (Froese-Germain et al. 2012).

CONCLUSION

The schools in the Indian state of Tripura have to work on school readiness for inclusive education. Access to educational institutions and the learning experience is a prerequisite for the success of inclusive education. The schools in Tripura ought to make concerted efforts to make their infrastructure exemplary in all respects. The sensitisation of the headmasters/headmistresses about disabilities, the capabilities of children with disabilities, the needs of children with disabilities, and their capacity building are much needed to drive the efforts towards inclusive education. A large number of children with disabilities are just as capable as their peers without disability, but experience barriers due to lack of inclusive practices in schools. Equipping the regular teachers with the knowledge and skills about inclusive education pedagogies is a must for children with disabilities to experience inclusion and learn. Equitable learning opportunities

have to be provided to all children with disabilities without underestimating their potential.

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