

Inclusion Practices of School Management Committees (SMCs) In Secondary School for Students with Learning Difficulties



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Abstract

This paper reports an exploratory survey of current state of inclusion practices of School Management Committees (SMCs) of secondary school for students with learning difficulties (LD) in rural govt sponsored Bengali medium secondary school under state board in district Howrah of West Bengal (India). The main aim of the study was to investigate how SMCs operate their inclusive practices for Students with LD. Interviews with head teachers, discussions with various Focused group and its analysis yielded the following broad themes: (a) Awareness of SMC – lack of awareness of SMC members about students with LD, Inclusion, (b) Reality check of inclusion practices – it reveals that there is gap between theory and practices. No such mentionable identification and initiatives in school and negative attitude of parent as well as community regarding inclusion and valuing of diversity makes the gap. (c) Challenges of inclusion of students with LD – peers' acceptance, non-supportive view of parents, limited resources and learning environment are some of the major challenges to be addressed. Outcomes of this study can guide school administrator, school management committees, policy maker with a baseline scenario of inclusion practices for students with LD in secondary school. This paper is an extract of M.Phil. Work.

Keywords: Inclusion practices, School Management Committees (SMCs), Right to Education Act, Student with Learning Difficulties (LD)

Introduction

Inclusive education promotes initiatives ensuring education for all children, irrespective of children with or without special educational needs, into the mainstream education system. There are a series of national and international acts such as the United Nations Salamanca Statement Framework for Action (UNESCO, Salamanca statement and framework for action on special education, 1994) asking governments to develop inclusive education in their education system. The notion of Inclusive education policy is to cater and to respond equitably and accordingly to the diverse needs of all children irrespective of disability, gender, ethnicity or other disadvantages [(T.Booth , M.Ainscow, 1998); (M. Ainscow , T. Booth , A. Dyson, 2006)]. It is a continuous process of identification and removal of barriers. It targets those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement in terms of their presence, participation and achievement (UNESCO, Guidelines for inclusion - Ensuring access to education for all, 2005). India made elementary education a fundamental right as per its Constitutional Act (86 amendment, Art 21A) (2002) by initiating the scheme of free and compulsory education to all children of age 6 – 14 years. Under the Right to Education Act (2009), there was a clear attempt to implement inclusive education in regular educational setups. Also, for the education of children with special needs, the act indicates conjunction with Chapter V of the Persons with Disability Act, 1995. "The Act ensures that every child with special needs is entitled to free education up to the age of 18 years. Keeping this in view, the Govt. of India had accelerated the new scheme of Inclusive Education to achieve the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2010".

Review of Literature

Students with learning disabilities and inclusive education

"Students with learning disabilities constitute a significant part of population of students with disabilities in mainstream school set up"

(G.Büttner,M.Hasselhorn, 2011). “ It is believed that learning disabilities are ‘less severe’ than other difficulties such as autism and hence students with learning disabilities are considered as ‘good option’ if the goal is to educate them in mainstream school” (H.Sakiz, H.Z.Sart, B.Börkan, B.Korkmaz, N.Babür, 2015). In his paper, H.Sakiz showed that “positive attitude towards diversity; school management committee’s involvement in student’s identification, planning and implementation; community support; service training for professional development can constitute a good inclusion of students with learning disabilities” (Sakiz, 2018).

In this paper, the inclusion of students with learning difficulties is considered. Learning difficulties refers to the difficulties in basic academic skills like

reading, writing, arithmetic problems, etc. Due to such difficulties, students are lagging others in their academic performance. Teachers in their regular classes fail to cater to all such students together according to their educational need. As a result, they lose their interest in the learning process, often dropping out of school. Learning difficulties (LD), if they persist for long, can turn into learning disabilities. School management committees (SMCs) should involve themselves in planning some initiatives for them. For that, SMCs should be aware of students with LD and make it known to their parents and community people. This paper is attempted to shed some light about the current state of inclusion practices of SMCs for these students with LD those may at risk of being learning disabled.

About SMC Composition (as per Management of Sponsored Institutions (Secondary) Rules)

Member	Details
President	Appointed by Department of School Education of the State Government
Two representatives of society/institution	Co-operated with state government in setting up the institution
One Government official	Nominated by the Director of School Education, West Bengal
Two persons (interested in education)	Nominated by the Director of School Education, West Bengal
One medical practitioner	Nominated by the Director of School Education, West Bengal
The Head of the Institution	Of the concerned school
Three representatives of the teachers	Of the concerned school (elected)
Two representatives of guardian (at least one woman for girls’ school)	Nominated by the President of the SMC
One representative of the whole-time non-teaching staff	Of the concerned school (elected)

Aim of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the present state of the SMCs practice of inclusion for students with LD in Howrah district of West Bengal in India. A research question was framed to realize the purpose of the study: “How do SMCs operate their inclusion practices in the context of students with LD?”

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were SMC members, Head teachers and academic council members of school who are identified through the following way:

Targeted population of the study is being fixed with all SMCs of Rural Co-Ed secondary gov.-sponsored school in Howrah district of West Bengal (India). These SMCs are being selected by considering the following facts:

1. The schools have not been covered by any NGO support.
2. They must have no external intervention by any non-government agency or others.

With the above facts, 11schools are being selected purposively. The schools are named as ‘School - 1’, ‘School - 2’, ‘School - 3’, ‘School - 4’, ‘School - 5’, ‘School - 6’, ‘School - 7’, ‘School - 8’, ‘School - 9’, ‘School - 10’, ‘School - 11’.

It was planned initially to have eleven (n=11) head teachers from each school, twenty-two (n=22) teachers of academic councils, School Management Committee (SMC) members (n=66) including teacher

representatives, parent representatives. These would create a total of 99 participants from selected 11 schools. However, some of them are not interested to participate in the study and some of the expected respondents failed to present leaving a final total of 83 with a shortfall of 16 individuals, 9 of the 16 were from the SMC members; and 2 were from head teachers and 5 were from teachers of academic councils. Hence, these 83 participants were available for the interviews and focus group discussions.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was designed to collect qualitative data about the study from head teachers. The interview took place at participating schools at a time suitable to the participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and research ethics. Before the engagement of session, permission was sought from the respondents to audio-record all the interviews and focus group discussions. The head teachers of selected schools were met at the scheduled venue where they were engaged individually in interview sessions. Teachers of academic councils of school were engaged on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The parent representatives of SMCs and other SMC members were met in their respective scheduled venue for the FGD sessions.

The data collection was profiled according to the theme of the study. This study collected data on these themes. The respondents were engaged in FGDs and interviews, along with interacting cross-sectional discussions. A draft report was prepared

during the sessions together with the audio – record. After the entire session, a feedback session of respondents was conducted.

Analysis

The audio files of the session were transcribed with draft report to analyse the responses of the respondents. In order to enhance internal validity (Creswell, 2008), the transcribed data was shared with the participants for their suggestions and necessary changes were made. The final transcript was translated into English by the author. *Inductive analysis approach* (Thomas, 2006) was used to analyse the data.

The coding technique described by Creswell (2002) was followed to develop the themes from the data. There are five steps in coding process for inductive analysis. These are: a) Initial reading of text data file, b) identify specific text segments according to objectives, c) label the segments of text to create thematic categories, d) reduce overlap and redundancy among the thematic categories, and e) create a model incorporating most important thematic categories (J.W.Creswell, 2002)

Findings:

The findings of the study are presented in three broad sections: *Awareness of SMCs, Reality check of Inclusion practices and Challenges of inclusion of students with LD.*

Awareness of SMCs

Awareness about Inclusion and students with LD:

The majority of the SMC members were not much aware of the importance of inclusion in education. They expressed their opinion about inclusion. Some of them thought that inclusion means getting a dropped-out child back into school.

... *"We used to visit the place of those children who suddenly stopped themselves from going to school...we talked to their parents about sending them back to school...inclusion in this sense can be done..."* [SMC member (parent representative) (school – 1): FGD]

Majority of SMC members know about students who are facing difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetical problem, etc. But they have inadequate knowledge about the fact. Members are neither aware of the issues nor prepared to implement strategies for it.

Awareness about Functions of SMC and Provision of Planning For LD Students

The role of SMC members in the preparation of the School Development Plan (SDP) is negligible. Very few SMC members know about the process of making of such plan. SMC members agree that students who are facing difficulties in learning should be taken care of. But they don't know about SMCs provision of planning for LD students about their learning process.

Not all parents-members of SMCs are literate. They don't have knowledge of the duties and functions of SMC members. SMC members respond that they used to attend managing committee (MC) meetings regularly. To them, the function of SMC members is to attend such meetings.

... *"I have attended all MC meetings. In the meeting, numerous agendas are discussed. The head of the school is the person responsible to implement those resolutions of the meetings on behalf of the school."*

... [SMC member (school – 1): FGD]

SMC members participate in neither of academic planning, nor in the teaching-learning process. They think that the total academic process of the school should be entirely maintained by the head of the institution together with teaching and non-teaching staff.

Reality check of Inclusion Practices

Identification and Initiatives of SMCs for students with LD

Majority of SMC members said that no initiatives for identification of students with LD were taken. Some SMC members shared that in their school they organized some extra classes for students facing difficulties in basic reading and writing. They also said that such initiatives were taken 3years ago, but no evaluation or repetition of such initiatives was done. One of presidents of SMCs said:

... *"We have organized special classes for students who are facing difficulties in basic reading and writing. Parents of such students have supported us and gladly accepted the initiatives. They asked for special classes every year and they also suggested organizing some fixed classes for these types of learners at least once a week. But due to lack of teaching resources, and funds, we couldn't maintain it"* ... [President, SMC (school – 5): FGD]

Parents' View

Parent representatives of SMCs consider LD as a very common problem in school and they have an ignorant attitude towards it. Parents consider such problems lightly and hence they care little about it.

One parent representative said:

... *"In my school days, I had the same arithmetic problem that my boy has. I think it's very common to have a basic arithmetic problem in school"* ... [Parent representative, SMC (school – 3): FGD]

Challenges of Inclusion of Students with LD

Despite poor consideration about the inclusion of students with LD, teachers tried to manage those learners in their classes. They have faced various challenges regarding the inclusion of students with LD in regular class setup. They asked school management to get involved in the process actively.

One teacher representative said:

... *"Being an English teacher, I have faced several students with reading difficulties. They can't even read at least two-three lines of English passage. Those students should be addressed to make them able at least to read English. I have drawn SMC's attention to such a problem. They helped to make aware parents of those learners and make them take extra care of their child at home"* ... [Teacher Representative, SMC (school – 2): FGD]

There are various challenges that come from FGD of SMC members and teachers. These are:

Peer Group's Acceptance

Students with LD are bullied by their peers. They like to sit on the last bench to avoid facing

teachers. They talk with few others of those who do not have such difficulties. Though teachers tried hard to cater to those learners needs in classes, they failed due to time limitations, a high number of students in classes, proper planning, etc. One teacher said:

... *"Students with the basic arithmetical problem are given a simple task in a group. But in class, regular teaching with planned syllabus doesn't allow me to take extra care for them. The time limitation is also a constraint for them"* ... [Teacher Representative, SMC (school – 7): FGD]

Non – Supportive Views of Parents and Community

Majority of SMC members agree that there is a lack of support of parents for their children with LD. During FGD, head teacher of school – 5 said about a student of seventh grade facing reading difficulties,

... *"Parents of the student are not aware of the problem. They think he may overcome this problem by himself in the recent future."* ... [Head Teacher, SMC (school – 5): FGD]

There is a perception among community people that they are highly positive about inclusion in education as they used to attend various awareness programs on Inclusion.

Despite this, there was a perception that community members and parents do not allow their child to study with students who are lagging due to various learning problems. One teacher representative (SMC) said:

... *"They (parents, community members) told us that their child being having no LD failed to have proper support in class where you (teachers) are trying to include students with LD... if a child with LD is struggling, why should our child should suffer?"* ... [Teacher Representative, SMC (school – 5): FGD]

Limited Resources

A head teacher of a school talked about lack of financial support. Schools were provided aids from the government but there is no provision of financial support for assistive devices, and teaching-learning materials. Also, the funding that schools received is not satisfactory to organize skilled teachers support for students with LD. Head teacher of school – 3 has mentioned that:

... *"Insufficient financial support, lack of skilled teachers - do not allow us to plan about struggling learners.... though we planned to use some improvised teaching-learning low-cost materials and devices, but it is not always possible due to time constraint"* ... [Head teacher, SMC (school – 3): FGD]

Learning Environment

Learning process of the child requires a proper learning environment. Majority of schools have high teacher-student ratio. Hence, teachers cannot adequately address all students as per their learning needs. Classes with many students are disadvantageous for all students with or without LD. Assistant teacher of a school shared:

... *"In my math class, I used to face 65 students. The first task of my class is to manage the classroom...It's very impossible to check notebooks of all students...and to cater their learning needs is*

highly impossible in such classes" ... [Assistant teacher (school – 2): FGD]

Conclusions

The findings of the study is consistent with the major findings of some previous studies by Agbenyega (2007) (J.Agbenyega, 2007); Giffard-Lindsay (2007) (Giffard-Lindsay, 2007); Huang (2007) (K.Y.Huang, 2007); Prinsloo (2001) (E.Prinsloo, 2001) ; Mullick, Deppeler & Sharma(2012) (J. Mullick ,J.Deppeler , U.Sharma, 2012) regarding implementing of inclusive education and its challenges. This study also confirmed that to sustain inclusive practices it requires to empowered local authority, resource mobilisation, sense of valuing of accepting diversity.

The study presented the current state of inclusion practices by the SMCs for students with LD in district Howrah of West Bengal. The findings of the paper reveal that there is a lack of awareness of SMC members about its provision of participation in planning and decision-making of initiatives designed for students with LD. The study also identified limitation of resources, teacher – student ratio, school size, parents' low awareness and lack of skilled teachers as barriers for including students with LD. Based on the study the following suggestions can be made for improving SMCs' inclusive practices for students with LD.

1. First of all, the Cluster Level Resource Centre (CLRC) should take the responsibility to organize awareness program for SMC members as well as community members;
2. There must be at least one parent representative whose child is facing the barrier of LD or whose child has special educational needs;
3. Orientation program can be organized for the teachers;
4. Action plan can be made by school management and teachers for the students with LD to prevent their difficulties;
5. Guidance and counseling centers should be made in school for assisting the students;
6. Utilization of community resources can solve the funding problem and grow awareness of parents and other community members.

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Appendix – 1

Initial codes	Reduced codes	Sub themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Inclusion is to include drop out students in schools or to bring back left out students. ✓ Students with reading difficulties, writing difficulties, arithmetic problems are majorly found in school. ✓ Students with attention deficits are also found. ✓ Unaware about the features, identification, treatment for students with such problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Misconception of inclusivity in education. ➤ Authorities are not much aware about students with learning difficulties. 	<p>Awareness about Inclusion and LD students</p>	<p>SMC AWRENESS OF</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ SMC members use to attend various meeting addressing numerous agendas. ✓ Members participate in discussion, conveying their opinion about meeting agendas. ✓ Not much aware about planning at school level management of academic process. ✓ Participate to confirm community participation in school related issues. ✓ Not aware much about their own functionalities, duties except attending various SMC meetings. ✓ No such orientation program or workshop for duties and responsibilities of SMC members are planned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ SMC members are unaware about functions and duties of them. ➤ Attending meeting about various agendas and help in community interaction are main concerns to them 	<p>Awareness about functions of SMC and provision of planning for LD students.</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ No such identification method is taken. ✓ Extra classes for some students with reading and writing difficulties are taken in small scale without proper identification. ✓ No evaluation of these classes is taken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ No such identification of LD students and initiatives is taken except a few schools with some extra classes. 	Identification and Initiatives of SMC for LD students	REALITY CHECK OF INCLUSION PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Parents consider difficulties in reading, writing of their child as very normal scenario. ✓ Arithmetic problem is very common for them. ✓ No such extra care is given. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Learning difficulties are very common in child and hence there is no extra care is given. 	Parents view	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Students with LD are treated as object of fun. ✓ Students' refusal to sit, play and learn in the company of student with LD and left them at last benches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Non-supportive behavior towards students with LD. 	Peer group's acceptance	CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH LD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Parents have low expectation for their children with LD. ✓ Community leaders believe insufficient resources to include students with LD. ✓ LD is too common problem that child's parent faced too. ✓ Parent are unaware about LD problems may turn into learning disability in recent future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Non-supportive belief of community leaders and parents. ➤ Parents low expectation and unawareness about LD. 	Non supportive views of parents and community	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Little funding for socio-economically disadvantaged students. ✓ No funding for assistive device for students with LD. ✓ No funding to employ skilled teacher for students with LD. ✓ Need for teaching-learning materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ No fund for extra care for student with LD. ➤ Need for resources to support teaching 	Limited resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Large class size to ensure learning of all students. ✓ Challenges to run group work in because of small classroom. ✓ Limited computer lab facility that may require addressing learning difficulties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ High teacher student ratio ➤ Limitations of physical resources 	Learning environment	