

Inclusive Education in Tripura Perception of Special Educators and Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

India is moving rapidly in the direction of providing inclusive education to all students, particularly Children with Special Needs. The special educators appear to be driving this effort by supporting the CwSN. In the present study, the respondents — the special educators and CwSN shared their experiences and perceptions about inclusive education in the State of Tripura. Data was collected using rating scales from both the sets of respondents and analysed. Results suggest that the special educators are working hard to reach out to all CwSN in the schools that they are employed, however, they feel ill-equipped to teach CwSN that they are not trained to teach. They seek collaboration from regular teachers. CwSN like their schools as they feel accepted by the peers and teachers, and indicate that they learn a lot in school.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education for Children with Special Needs (CwSN) is not new to India. The idea of inclusive education was first adopted when India became a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and

Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), and later it espoused the term inclusive education that was reflected in the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) launched in 1994 and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) in the 2000s.

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Since then, each Indian State has been proactive in implementing inclusive education in their schools. The State of Tripura is no exception to the efforts towards inclusive education.

A report published by the State Project Office, School Education Department, Government of Tripura in 2011 highlighted the achievements made by SSA during the period 2001–2002 to 2010–2011. It enumerated the various activities undertaken during this period for including CwSN. A document of the annual work plan and budget of integrated *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA), Tripura for financial year 2016–2017 was published by Government of Tripura which provided the report of the Inclusive Education of Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) additionally highlighting the challenges and issues for inclusive education in the State of Tripura. These challenges were enumerated as lack of resource teachers and therapists, lack of trained teachers on all disabilities, low enrolment of girls with special needs, non-representation of parents of CwSN and special educators in school management committees, lack of sufficient well-equipped resource rooms, and need for architecturally barrier-free environment to increase physical access. In 2018–2019, *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* was launched and to continue the efforts towards inclusive education. In November 2020, the Tripura Council

of Ministers resolved to launch a project ‘Saksham Tripura Project’ in 400 schools in Tripura for the holistic development of CwSN (United News of India, 2020). For this purpose, 100 special educators were appointed and four partnering agencies with six mentors guide and monitor the special educators to make inclusive education for CwSN possible.

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The implementing and monitoring of the ‘Saksham Tripura Project’ is done by an international NGO, Christoffel Blinden Mission (CBM) who is appointed as the project management unit in the Directorate of Education, Tripura. CBM appointed the researchers to undertake an evaluation study to determine the status of inclusive education in Tripura since the implementation of the ‘Saksham Tripura Project’ so as to make decisions about continuing the project implementation.

The success of implementation of inclusive education rests upon the many functionaries involved in it—the school leadership, teachers, parents, special educators, and students with and without disability. Similarly, the perceptions that these functionaries have about inclusive education and experiences of inclusive education communicates about the status of inclusive education as well. CBM was interested not only in the gauging the quantitative changes like increase in enrolment of CwSN or appointments

of special educators, but also the experiences and perceptions of these two functionaries in the context of inclusive education in Tripura. There have been studies (Dorji, 2018; Bhat, 2017) focusing on the challenges faced by the school administrators and general teachers to implement inclusive education but not much is studied from the perspective of special educators and children with disabilities. The study specifically attempted to answer two questions: (i) what are the perceptions of the special educators about inclusive education in the schools that they work in? and, (ii) what are the perceptions of CwSN about inclusive education?

SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Special educators are teachers who have the expertise to teach CwSN. The special educators are registered as rehabilitation workers with the Rehabilitation Council of India, a statutory body set up in 1993 under the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992. The registered special educators hold a Central Rehabilitation Registry (CRR) number and may have a D.Ed. (Special Education), B.Ed. (Special Education), or M.Ed. (Special Education) and they may be trained in teaching CwSN having any of the disabilities, viz., autism, hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual disability, learning disability, multiple disability, or deaf-blindness. The special educators are employed in a variety of settings wherein they provide special

education to CwSN. Thus, they work in inclusive schools, special schools, clinics that offer remedial services to CwSN, and provide home-based education to CwSN. The special educators have been ascribed different labels—inclusive education resource teachers under the SSA and special educators under the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011). As inclusive education resource teachers under the SSA, they work as itinerant teachers observed Rao et al. (2020).

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 (Government of India) recognises 21 disabilities and these 21 disabilities or special needs are considered when data about CwSN enrolled in schools is collected for Unified District Information System for Education (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). In the academic year 2021-22, 22.67 lakh CwSN were enrolled in schools in India with 5984 in schools in Tripura (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Method: The survey method was employed for the study.

Sample: The sample comprised of special educators and CwSN. There were 60 special educators having either Diploma (N=35), Bachelor's (N=24) or Master's (N=1) degree in special education and were specialising in teaching children with

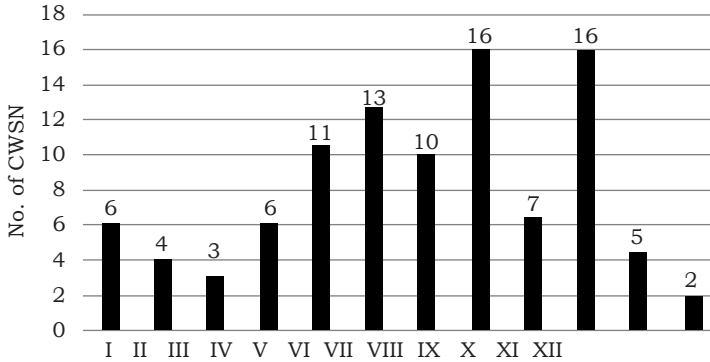


Fig. 1: Grade-wise distribution of number of CwSN in the sample

either intellectual disability (N=37), hearing impairment (N=11) or visual impairment (N=12).

The 99 CwSN comprising of 51 boys and 48 girls participated in the study. The documented disabilities in these children were autism, intellectual disability, locomotor disability, low vision, multiple disability, speech and hearing disability, and visual

impairment. The number of CwSN differed from grade to grade. The grade-wise distribution of the CwSN in the sample is given in Fig. 1.

The disability-wise distribution of the CwSN in the sample is depicted in Fig. 2. The maximum number of children had locomotor conditions (N=33) and there was only one child with autism.

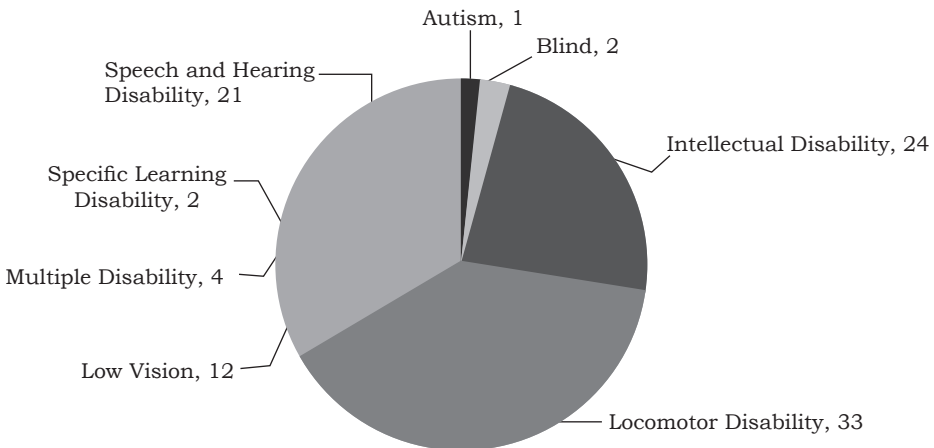


Fig. 2: Number of CwSN with different disabilities

TOOLS

The data was collected from the special educators as well as the CwSN using rating scales. The rating scale for special educators was a four-point 30-item self-report Likert-type rating scale requiring them to indicate their agreement or disagreement ranging from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The CwSN had to indicate their experiences in their school on a 30-item three-point rating scale of never, sometimes, and always which indicated their perceptions.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for the study was collected from the State board schools in Tripura after receiving the permissions from the Directorate of Secondary Education, Government of Tripura, India. The special educators collected data from the CwSN after receiving training from the researchers during a three-hour training conducted using Google Meet platform. As part of the training, they were introduced to the rating scales, and were trained in the administration of the same. To collect data from the CwSN, the special educators read out the items from the scale, and then recorded their responses by placing a tick mark under the appropriate column. The self-report rating scale using Google Form was completed by the special educators.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The objectives of the present study were to explore the perceptions of the special educators about inclusive education in Tripura, and to get insight into the experiences and perceptions of CwSN about studying in inclusive schools.

Special Educators' Perceptions

Inclusive education for CwSN will remain to be a dream if not for the involvement of special educators in their educational life. Special educators are specially trained to teach CwSN and they may do so in a special school set up, home-based education set up, or even an inclusive school set up. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises the role of special educators for providing educational services to CwSN who need the services and hence, special educators are an important stakeholder group in the effective implementation of inclusive education. The perceptions of 60 special educators were mapped using a 30-item rating scale. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses obtained on a four-point scale (strongly agree – SA, agree – A, disagree – D, strongly disagree – SD) for each item in the scale.

Table 1
Perceptions of Special Educators

S. No.	Item	Sa	A	D	SD
1.	My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach CwSN.	45	43	7	5
2.	CwSN should be in special education classes.	25	45	15	15
3.	I give suggestions to the regular education teacher about CwSN in her class.	33	52	8	7
4.	I adapt the curriculum for CwSN to help their learning.	40	43	7	10
5.	Both regular education teachers and special education teachers should teach CwSN.	37	37	22	5
6.	CwSN should be trained to learn independently to help them in regular classroom.	47	35	12	7
7.	I need more training in order to teach CwSN with a disability other than my specialisation area.	35	47	12	7
8.	I discuss the adapted curriculum of CwSN with the regular education teacher or classroom teacher.	20	60	12	8
9.	Isolation in a special class has a negative effect on the social and emotional development of CwSN.	27	38	18	17
10.	The school heads should be aware of all the concessions and benefits for CwSN.	50	37	7	7
11.	Implementation of inclusive education is possible when general education teachers and special education teachers work together.	57	32	7	5
12.	When teaching CwSN, I use different teaching methods.	42	43	7	8
13.	CwSN are more likely to show behavioural problems in regular class.	8	48	32	12
14.	The room where I teach CwSN is well-equipped with teaching learning material according to their needs.	10	20	37	33
15.	Inclusion of CwSN requires change in regular classroom procedures that can be implemented.	20	63	8	8

16.	I share such classroom activities with classroom teacher that all children including CwSN can participate in them.	33	42	12	13
17.	I teach CwSN to use assistive technology.	25	45	20	10
18.	CwSN should spend maximum time with the special teacher for better learning.	30	47	13	10
19.	I help CwSN to complete their classwork to be at par with their peers.	35	52	5	8
20.	The school heads should make available all provisions and benefits to CwSN.	43	42	5	10
21.	Regular education teachers should not be responsible for teaching CwSN.	10	12	37	42
22.	I use different teaching methods to teach CwSN (for example, use of concrete experiences, aids, models, etc.).	45	40	8	7
23.	The inclusion of CwSN can be beneficial for students without disability.	17	53	15	15
24.	Every school with CwSN should have some allocated budget for resources required for them (for example, braille books, brailers, hearing aids, teaching learning materials).	47	35	7	12
25.	I prepare different teaching learning material depending on the learning needs of CwSN (for example, braille material for child with VI).	48	37	10	5
26.	CwSN should be given every opportunity to function in the regular classroom setting wherever possible.	35	52	7	7
27.	A regular teacher cannot give due attention to CwSN because of large class size.	27	45	17	12
28.	There should be more coordinated effort among for the school head, classroom teacher, special teacher, block head and the parent for the inclusion of CwSN.	57	30	5	8
29.	The needs of CwSN can be met through special school placement than inclusive school placement.	27	53	7	13
30.	CwSN should be allowed to participate in social events held in school.	57	32	5	7

The perceptions of 60 special educators in Tripura regarding to the practices, policies and challenges of inclusive education for children with special needs (CwSN) were mapped using a four-point likert-type rating scale and anecdotal recording of their responses that clarified their standpoint.

The special educators were confident about the training they have received in their disability specialisation and could effectively teach those children; however, more than 80 per cent indicated that they experience difficulty in teaching children with other disabilities than their area of specialisation and thus, need training in teaching them. When asked about curriculum adaptations for CwSN, the majority of the responses were in affirmative (83 per cent). The special educators, nevertheless, conveyed their concern that they are not sure whether the curriculum adaptations that they are doing for CwSN other than their specialisation are appropriate or not; attributing it to lack of training in understanding the teaching methodology for these children. Different teaching methods were used for teaching CwSN by 85 per cent special educators; additionally, 85 per cent special educators prepared teaching learning material as per the needs of the CwSN they were teaching. In the resource room, 87 per cent special educators work with the CwSN to assist them to complete the classwork so that they do not lag

behind in the studies. Some CwSN benefit from the use of assistive technology, the special educators (70 per cent) teach the CwSN how to use the technology. When probed, the special educators responded that the most widely used assistive technologies are pencil grips for young CwSN, magnifiers for CwSN having low vision and hearing aids for those with hearing impairment.

A sizeable percentage (78.34 per cent) of special educators agree to a need for collaboration and joint responsibility sharing between them and regular teachers to further inclusive education for CwSN indicating that the onus of inclusive education for CwSN should be on regular teachers as well, reported 73.34 per cent of special educators. They also indicated (88.34 per cent) that the regular teachers and special educators should work collaboratively. However, the special educators reported that when they convey to the regular teachers the nature of curriculum adaptation that they have done for the CwSN, the regular teachers are not necessarily interested in knowing what they have done, how the curriculum is adapted and how it can be implemented.

One of the benefits of inclusive education is that it provides more opportunities to CwSN to socialise and develop social emotional skills. In addition, this creates awareness about CwSN amongst the peers as well. This resonated in the responses by the special educators. Nearly

70 per cent of special educators think that students without disability benefit when students with disability are included in the class.

Involvement of CwSN in social events is needed according to a large percentage (88.34 per cent) of special educators. Yet, special educators appeared to be sceptical about inclusive class placement for CwSN for academic management or behaviour management. With 56 per cent special educators indicating that CwSN show behaviour problems in inclusive classes, approximately 80 per cent special educators agree that special school placement is better for CwSN than inclusive school placement. According to 77 per cent special educators, CwSN should spend more time with them because the CwSN learn better with them, indicates Table 1. This could be a possibility since 72 per cent special educators indicate that regular teachers cannot give time to CwSN as the class size is large.

Inclusive education efforts require the support of the institutional heads. In this context, 50 per cent special educators strongly agree and observe that it is necessary that headmasters of the schools be aware of the provisions for CwSN, and make those provisions available to the CwSN. Maximum percent (82 per cent) of special educators feel the need to have allocated budget for CwSN for meeting their needs.

A discussion with the special educators provided another dimension of information. They indicated that there is a near absence of resource room in the schools. They reported that they do not have a designated place in the school premise where the special educators can work with the CwSN. In the schools where resource rooms are present, they are dusty with barren walls and barely have any teaching learning resources.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The CwSN were asked to respond to statements about their experiences on a three-point rating scale of never, sometimes and always. Only those students who were able to comprehend the instructions and statements, and were able to orally communicate with the special educators were included in the study. The children who were attending homebound programmes were not included in the sample. Thus, data was collected from 99 students who had milder disabilities and attended the school on a regular basis.

The responses given by the CwSN can be understood with reference to physical accessibility in the school, teacher behaviour towards them, educational accommodations, their views about special education and social inclusion. Table 2 presents the percentage of responses obtained on a three-point rating scale on each item of the scale.

Table 2
Responses Obtained from Children with Special Needs

S. No.	Item	Sa	A	D
1.	In class, my class teacher makes me study different things than what my classmates study (For example: adapted curriculum).	38.38	40.40	21.21
2.	My teachers encourage me to participate in class activities.	7.07	29.29	63.64
3.	My teachers have the same expectations from me as they have from my classmates.	15.15	45.45	39.39
4.	I have friends in class with whom I play study and do different class activities.	15.15	31.31	53.54
5.	Children around me call me names and trouble me.	59.60	34.34	6.06
6.	In addition to my class teachers, special teacher also teaches me on some days.	8.08	23.23	68.69
7.	I am able to access the playground, science laboratory, library, wash room, drinking water area, etc., all by myself.	19.19	32.32	48.48
8.	My school teachers think that all students with disability are always dependent on others.	43.43	44.44	12.12
9.	I do P.T. or Physical Education activities like my classmates on the field.	29.29	40.40	29.29
10.	My art and craft teachers help me to complete my art and craft work.	23.23	40.40	36.36
11.	My teachers use different ways to teach me (for example, using models charts, etc.) so that I understand well.	16.16	33.33	50.51
12.	I am allowed to answer questions in the exams orally.	40.40	31.31	28.28
13.	I feel that everyone in my school looks at me differently when they see me.	51.52	37.37	11.11
14.	In the science laboratory, I am allowed to do experiments like my classmates.	33.33	32.32	34.34
15.	I am invited for my classmates' birthday parties.	18.18	34.34	47.47
16.	My teachers' pay extra attention to whether I complete all my class work.	13.13	44.44	42.42

17.	My teachers teach me different strategies to prepare for my exams (for example, tricks to memorise).	23.23	38.38	38.38
18.	I am given extra time to complete my exam papers.	21.21	31.31	47.47
19.	My teachers teach me in a very structured manner that is easy for me to follow.	41.41	39.39	19.19
20.	My teachers give me opportunities to do activities that I am good at (for example, art, music, games, etc.).	13.13	32.32	54.55
21.	I always want to study in the same class as my classmates.	6.06	22.22	71.72
22.	I am taught like all other students in my class.	11.11	29.29	59.60
23.	I am given help every time we do an activity in class.	15.15	45.45	39.39
24.	My special education teacher teaches me the way I can understand better.	6.06	20.20	73.74
25.	I am taught how to behave with other people.	12.12	40.40	47.47
26.	My classmates want me to be a part of their group.	15.15	35.35	49.49
27.	Everyone around me is overprotective about me.	21.21	56.57	22.22
28.	I am taught individually, in small groups and with the whole class at different times.	41.41	43.43	15.15
29.	I get extra time to complete my class work.	19.19	37.37	43.43
30.	I feel lonely in my class.	49.49	32.32	18.18

Data in Table 2 indicates that less than 50 per cent of the CwSN were able to access the various physical spaces in the school at all times independently. The perceptions that the CwSN have about the teachers was also studied. It was found that the teachers encourage the CwSN to participate in class activities at all times, as indicated by 63.64 per cent of the children. More than half

(54.55 per cent) CwSN report that the teachers give them opportunities to participate in activities they are good at. The teachers also appear to view the CwSN positively as not depending on others around them persistently, 87.87 per cent CwSN mention this. A large percentage (86.87 per cent) CwSN state that teachers pay attention to them and check whether their classwork is complete.

In exploring the perception of curriculum accessibility and provision of accommodations during learning, it was found that 38.38 per cent of the teachers do not adapt the curriculum for CwSN, while 40.40 per cent do so only sometimes. Relatively a few students (18.18 per cent) indicated that their regular teachers adapt the curriculum according to their needs. This is seen in many ways—as class teacher is teaching the same content to all in the class (as indicated by 78.78 per cent of CwSN), setting the same learning objectives for all students, using the same teaching learning methods and material as used for all students without any differentiation (20 per cent). In contrast, data shows that 73.73 per cent of CwSN reported that the special educators teach them the way they understand.

When it comes to examinations and evaluations, less than 50 per cent (43.3 per cent) CwSN report always getting extra time to complete their papers. Moreover, 40.40 per cent CwSN indicated that they are never allowed to answer their exams orally. Paying attention to another aspect, the data indicates that social acceptance and social inclusion is high for CwSN. As reported by CwSN, more than 50 per cent of them have class friends to play and do activities; with a large percentage receiving invitations for birthday parties (47.47 per cent) always; nearly 49 per cent saying that classmates want them to be a part of their groups. Only about

six of the CwSN are called names by their peers and feel that they are viewed differently by the peers always (11.11 per cent). The 71.72 per cent of CwSN desire to be in the same class as their peers rather than study in a separate class.

DISCUSSION AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Under the ‘Saksham Tripura Project’ launched by the Government of Tripura, 100 special educators work as itinerant teachers in different government schools to further inclusive education efforts. Each special educator is placed in four schools and they visit each school assigned to them at least twice a week to provide special education services to the CwSN enrolled in these schools. Thus, the special educators provide additional support to the regular teachers in the schools to teach CwSN. The special educators are trained to teach children with one particular disability like intellectual disability or hearing impairment, etc. They do not have adequate knowledge and skills to teach children having other disabilities considering that most special education courses train people to deal with one particular disability (Prasad, 2022). Hence, despite the fact that special educators are employed, they are unable to meet the needs of all CwSN. In effect, there is a need for continuous professional development of the special educators to achieve momentum to the inclusive education efforts.

The special educators have indicated that inclusive education for CwSN should be a shared responsibility of the regular teachers and special educators. However, they have experienced relative disinterest on part of the regular teachers to understand their work with the CwSN. On the other hand, the CwSN from the study have experienced the efforts the regular teachers are taking to teach them. It is likely that both general teachers and special educators still think about inclusive education from the old perspective of separate services, not as one cohesive unit built on understanding and collaborative work as the concept of shared responsibility is still yet to mature (Alabdallat, Alkhamra, and Alkhamra, 2021). In a study by Carlson et. al. (2002) special educators expressed concern about their lack of preparation in collaboration and the implementation of collaboration with all personnel including professionals and families owing to the lack of coursework during their training. Since regular teachers and special educators are not imparted the competencies of collaboration for effective inclusion, there exists a need for the same (Conderman and Johnson-Rodriguez, 2009). Having received the training to build competencies for collaboration, they may work together to develop a curriculum that is accessible to all students, or the special educators might make modifications to the regular teacher's lesson plans. A

special educator may also create supplemental learning materials for specific students, including visuals, manipulatives, technology resources, and determine when one-on-one lessons might be needed. Both need to share the goals, classroom decisions, content planning, assessment of student learning, responsibility of students and classroom management as is done in cooperative teaching or team-teaching. Team teaching has a potential to promote inclusive learning, and when implemented appropriately, can impact positively upon the learning experiences of both teachers and students (Murphy, 2011). Team teaching repositions teachers and students to engage with one another in an atmosphere that capitalises upon, and builds relational trust and shared cognition. To discuss further, collaboration has evolved into a vital component of the effectiveness and success of inclusive education (Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016). While the special educators make appropriate accommodations for each CwSN as part of their regular classroom activities, the class teachers then have to use the accommodations as needed throughout the student's daily instruction. When this is done collaboratively, CwSN will avail equal access to instruction, materials, and evaluation, level the playing field and minimise the impact of the student's disability on their academic performance. However, if both general and special education teachers

are challenged with unplanned practices specific to the inclusive environment, this may impede the successful implementation of inclusion (Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education in Tripura is at a critical juncture. The special educators appointed under the 'Saksham Tripura Project' are striving to meet the needs of the diverse CwSN in the classrooms. How successful they will be in this effort will depend on the collaborative work done by the regular teachers in conjunction with the special educators. In addition, competency building of the special educators through cross-disability training during the professional development programmes will benefit.

CwSN who can benefit from inclusive school placement, need to continue being supported by the special educators who work in tandem with their regular teacher colleagues. The CwSN indicated that their teachers (special as well as regular) are teaching them using different methods and material. The CwSN experience a sense of acceptance and belonging in the inclusive schools from their peers. The stated observation, however, comes with a rider that the CwSN who participated in the study were the ones who were regular school attendees and had adequate communication skills to convey their thoughts and feelings. Most likely, they had milder disabilities and thus, inclusive education was working for them.

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