

National Educational Policies of India: Inclusion in ECCE

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Abstract

Young children need to be exposed to a variety of environments; they also need to interact with individuals from different backgrounds, castes, regions, disabilities, giftedness, etc. This would, on one hand, make the children aware of the different types of people around them and on the other hand, make marginalised and vulnerable children not feel left out in educational spaces. Inclusion in education is viewed differently in different parts of the world. Inclusive education is concerned with removing all the barriers to learning with the participation of all learners vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation (Kaga and Sretenov, 2021, p. 6). This research attempts to explore inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from an Indian perspective in light of the National Education Policies of 1968, 1986 and 2020. In addition, this paper attempts to investigate numerous barriers in the implementation of inclusive ECCE. This paper is based on secondary data and for this purpose, national documents on ECCE and diverse literature have been analysed.

INTRODUCTION

Every child, regardless of ability, has the right to participate in a wide range of activities and experiences as full members of their families, communities and society (NAEYC, 2009). An important first step towards a better future for children may be

creating an inclusive environment for them in their early years. Inclusive education, at the ECCE level, is thus not only a human right but also a fundamental right. Educating students from diverse backgrounds alongside one another in the same classroom, on field trips, in various cultural, curricular and co-curricular activities,

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and at sports events is known as inclusive education (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021, p. 3). It is expected that inclusion in ECCE will have a beneficial effect. It is heartening to note that the National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 gives significant weight to inclusive education and ECCE. In the document, both of these educational concepts are emphasised and explained in light of their significance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the concept of inclusive education with reference to the National Educational Policies of 1968, 1986 and 2020
2. To identify the barriers to inclusive education at the ECCE level with reference to the NEP 2020

REVIEW OF NATIONAL POLICIES OF EDUCATION OF 1968, 1986 AND 2020

In the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, the term inclusive education was not that common, but the term integration was used synonymously. The document talked about the provision of equal educational opportunities for girls, tribal people, rural and backward children, and handicapped children. For teaching handicapped children, it recommended a training programme for teachers so that handicapped children with mild disabilities can learn with regular students in a common school.

The NPE 1986 talked about providing educational opportunities to the underprivileged sections of

society, which include children from ecologically degraded areas, who are deprived of even the basic needs of food and water, children of slum areas, children of construction workers and landless agricultural labourers, and children belonging to SC and ST categories.

It also recommended education of children with special needs in common schools with normal children by making appropriate arrangements. The policy claimed that the successful implementation of its guidelines will make regular schools meet the educational needs of children with mild disabilities.

By the time NPE 1986 was launched, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) had already been implemented by the recommendation of the National Policy for Children, 1974. Therefore, NPE 1986 became the first national policy that talked about inclusive education from the early years, although indirectly. It did try to create a common school system where handicapped children could participate in learning by recommending that suitable arrangements in schools be made and suggesting other guidelines. Generally, it emphasised the education of children of labourers of different kinds, slum areas and ecologically degraded areas, and SC and ST sections of society. Thus, it talked about the inclusion of education for every child in the school system, irrespective of caste, religion, colour, area and physical disability.

In National Education Policy 2020, great emphasis was laid on the early childhood education of Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Later, in another document (The University Grants Commission, 2024), inspired by the NEP 2020, SEDGs was more comprehensively defined. Various SEDGs are shown in the following diagram.

Thus, understanding the importance of inclusion in ECCE, NEP 2020 said that recommendations regarding ECCE are particularly

it recommended that priority should be given to children with disabilities to ensure their inclusion and equal participation in ECCE. It also made clear that CWSN will also be able to participate in the regular schooling process from the foundational stage to higher education (Para 6.10). It also recommended formulating guidelines from the foundational stage to higher education to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students with learning disabilities (Para 6.13). To make common schools safe, secure

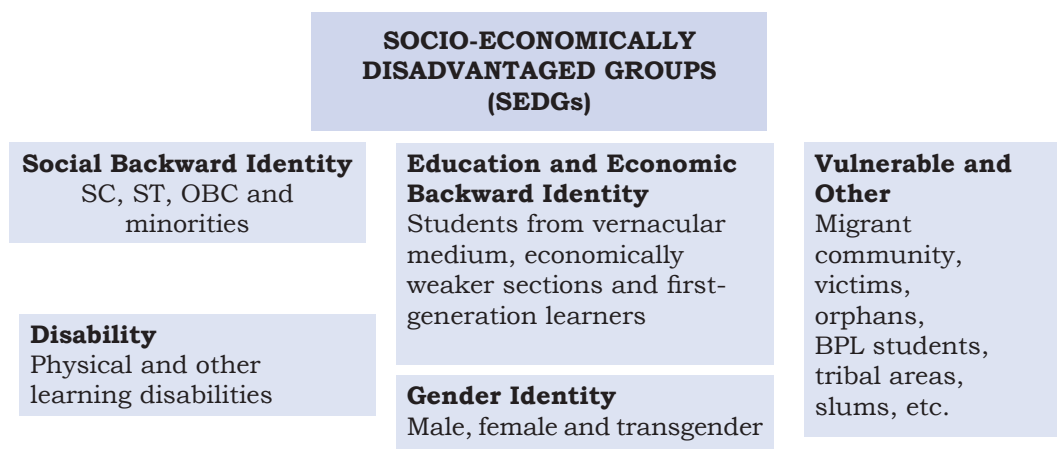


Figure 1: SEDGs

relevant and important for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, Para 6.3). In this document, the term learning disability was also introduced, which was found to be missing in the earlier two national policies. The two earlier policies used the terms handicapped or Children with Special Needs (CWSN). Thus, it projected a more holistic view of inclusive education. For making education inclusive at the ECCE level,

and appropriate for SEDGs, it suggested sensitisation of staff, students and administration (Para 6.14).

Thus, it is found that inclusive education in India was limited to handicapped children, children of rural and backward areas, and education of girls and tribal children, as seen in the National Education Policy document of 1968. Later, a few more sections of society, such as children of labourers and the deprived section of society

were added. Broadly speaking, NPE 1986 covered two sections of society—underprivileged children and handicapped children. The recent document, i.e., NEP 2020 gave a more comprehensive view and included other underrepresented sections like children with learning disabilities, transgenders and children who are victims of human trafficking and thus broadened the spectrum of inclusive education.

It took more than half a century to make early childhood education a part of the formal school system. The good thing about inclusive education at the ECCE level at this point is that almost all sections of society who have been deprived of the provision of education due to many reasons: be it economical, geographical, caste, religious, physical or psychological have been identified. Initiation of early childhood education in government schools will especially help vulnerable children, underprivileged and socio-economically backward children to get an education. Therefore, it becomes important to identify the barriers, so that early childhood education can become possible for every child in any corner of the nation.

Barriers to Inclusive Education at the ECCE Level with Special Reference to NEP 2020

Inconsistencies Between Practices and Policies

Both NPE 1968 (4b) and 1986 (4.9, ii) have talked about integrated education

and the common school system for persons with special needs. But the 1968 policy did not include students at the pre-primary level. Although the government launched the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme in December 1974 to provide educational opportunities to CWSNs in regular school, it has been found that IEDC's efforts were not entirely successful and all the efforts could not provide an inclusive environment for children from different disadvantaged groups (Kumar & Kumar, 2007, p. 4; Singh, 2016, p. 3227). According to Sharma and Deppeler (2005), pupils with minor disabilities can be easily integrated into mainstream schools, while those with severe disabilities typically do not go to school or, in rare instances, attend special education programmes.

The reason behind the unsuccessful inclusion is thus said to be the lack of awareness of the roles and responsibilities of different departments involved in providing education to the different SEDGs. The second reason would be the failure to enable children of such groups' access to facilities. NEP 2020 has addressed this issue of extending facilities to SEDGs by providing access to home-based education, special schools and neighbourhood schools.

Training of Teachers

Training teachers in identifying children with special needs and children with learning difficulties is the main issue. In one study, it

was found that anganwadi workers were capable of identifying such children, but they did not know how to deal with such children and help them to overcome their difficulties (The Ashoka Tree, 2018). Shukla and Agarwal (2015), in their study, found that primary teachers have low levels of knowledge and awareness about learning disabilities. Teachers who have done a B.Ed. in special education are selected to teach children with special needs, whereas in the schools, especially in anganwadis, a teacher who is 10+2 pass with the help of a certificate course of six months is supposed to deal with such children. Is this realistic? Thus, there is a need to look into this matter. Every child will have a different need and different learning style. Understanding the psychology of kids is complicated, and teaching them through informal ways needs not only practice but also knowledge of using different toys, games and techniques that will help to keep the children engaged. Thus, the training of ECCE teachers should be more comprehensive and practical.

Awareness of Parents

In 49 countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than their non-disabled peers (Kaga and Sretenov, 2021, p. 4). Thus, there is a need to spread awareness among society about educational and employment laws that are in place

for their child's betterment. Many studies have shown that parents are unaware of inclusive education (Sahu et al., 2018; Kshirsagar and Nathani, 2022; Dash, 2018). Research (Sahu et al., 2018) revealed that parents learned about their children's learning difficulties later in life—in the third or fourth class instead of when the kids were still in nursery or at a foundational level. As a result, raising parental awareness becomes crucial. This might be done in the following ways:

1. Awareness programmes at the pre-primary and primary levels can be organised by the Department of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Education in collaboration with local bodies (both in ICDS centres and in schools) for parents not well aware of learning difficulties.
2. Since the majority of young people will eventually become parents, it would be beneficial for prospective parents to have an understanding of the challenges their children may face in their learning process. This can be addressed if the fundamentals of child psychology are included in the curricula at the school or college level.
3. Further, the government may mandate that pre-primary educational institutions employ child counsellors so that children with learning difficulties can be addressed at an early stage.

Ratio of Children

As recommended in NEP 2020, the pupil-teacher ratio for pre-primary should be 25:1 in a class consisting primarily of socio-economic disadvantaged children (para 2.3). At such a ratio the teacher will be able to focus on students who are very active or vice versa. Some students will be gifted and others will have a learning disability or some other issues. Children at such a small age have less attention span. They get tired of doing things easily. It would get difficult to manage a class with a larger strength.

CONCLUSION

If it begins at the foundation stage, inclusion at a later stage of education won't be a problem. However, before doing so, it is important to remember that at the pre-primary level making both human and non-human changes is necessary. Human changes would be significant in terms of hiring qualified employees and other assistants, and non-human changes include making academic and infrastructure adjustments. It would be easier to implement inclusive education at the ECCE/pre-primary level if these two changes are adequately addressed.

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