



**PROGRESSING FROM SPECIAL TO INCLUSIVE SETTINGS:
 IMPLICATIONS OF NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020**

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Abstract:

National and international obligations make it mandatory that all educational institutions must practice inclusive education. India has recently proposed National Education Policy, 2020 with a view to revamp and revitalize Indian education. NEP, 2020 strongly and categorically focuses on implementing inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions. However, the policy is not clear about implementation of inclusive education. The present paper tries to highlight the inadequacies of the policy with reference to inclusive education.

Key-words: *Special Education, Inclusive Education, Children with Special Needs, National Education Policy, 2020*

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The global concern of education for all has been our focus since last few decades. Consequently, we have focused on bringing those children in to mainstream education who somehow are out of it. These particularly include girls, backward classes, schedule castes, schedule tribes and disabled. Recently, our focus has been much more upon education of children with disabilities as these constitute most deprived category among deprived and these also constitute a significant chunk of school-age children. We have catered to educational needs of all other categories in last five to six decades but children with disabilities still remain unattended in most of the societies in most of the nations.

As far as education of children with disabilities is concerned, we observe that most of them are in special schools. Special schools mainly cater to educational needs of a particular category of disability such as intellectual disability, hearing impairment, visual

impairment, and learning disabilities etc. However, the focus has shifted to inclusive education from special schools in recent times due to some serious concerns raised by advocacy organizations in the field of disability and parents of such children. The harmful effects of seclusion have in fact forced us towards inclusive educational settings.

The progression from special schools to inclusive educational settings have been gradual but it became mandatory after United Nations' Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). UNCRPD came into force in 2008 and it recommended in its Article 24 concerning education that "*States Parties shall ensure thatPersons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.....*". As India signed and ratified it, it became mandatory for the country to abolish special schools and provide inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions.

In fact, the government of India claims at all national as well as international forums that our country is practicing inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions.

The global education development agenda reflected in the Goal 4 (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by India in 2015 - seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. Such a lofty goal will require the entire education system to be reconfigured to support and foster learning, so that all of the critical targets and goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be achieved (NEP, 2020; introduction, p.3).

In compliance of UNCRPD and SDGs, the then government of India passed 'Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act)' which proclaims in its Chapter II, Article 3 that "Every child of the age of six to fourteen years, including a child referred to in clause (d) or clause (e) of section 2, shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school till the completion of his or her elementary education". Here, one can easily comprehend that the term 'every' includes children with disabilities and they are not an exception. It again stresses the need of progressing towards inclusive education.

Further, the government of India has passed 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD Act, 2016)' which also demands for inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions. In its Chapter III on 'Education', in Article 16 relating to duties of educational institutions, it categorically states that 'The appropriate Government and

the local authorities shall endeavour that all educational institutions funded or recognised by them provide inclusive education to the children with disabilities....”. When we talk about ‘funded or recognised’, in fact we spare none meaning thereby that **all** educational institutions are bound to practice inclusive education.

Keeping all the above compulsions, recommendations, and Acts in view, the government of India has adopted **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020** which proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education. The fundamental principles, mentioned in introductory part of NEP, 2020 (pp. 5-6), that will guide both the education system at large, as well as the individual institutions within it include among others the following:

- *recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student, by sensitizing teachers as well as parents to promote each student’s holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres;*
- *respect for diversity and respect for the local context in all curriculum, pedagogy, and policy, always keeping in mind that education is a concurrent subject;*
- *full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions to ensure that all students are able to thrive in the education system.*

Hence, we may safely assume that NEP, 2020 strongly and categorically focuses on implementing inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions. This claim is supported by Article 5.13 of NEP, 2020 (p. 21) which demands that “to help ensure that schools have positive learning environments, the role expectations of principals and teachers will explicitly include developing a caring and **inclusive** culture at their schools, for effective learning and the benefit of all stakeholders”.

However, an analysis of NEP, 2020 reveals that the policy document is not clear about implementation of inclusive education. Our claim about non-clarity, confusion and chaos towards implementation of inclusive education at all levels in all educational institutions gets support from many claims/proposals/recommendations related to inclusive education in the policy document at various instances in different contexts. For example, this policy proposes early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the country for the very first time through its Article-1. But the policy is silent on the issue of inclusive ECCE. In fact, there is no mention of children with disabilities or children with differing needs in context of implementing ECCE. It speaks volumes of negligence and non-clarity

about need of implementing inclusive education at all levels and in all educational institutions.

As far as primary education is concerned, Article-6 of NEP, 2020 comprehensively talks about equitable and inclusive education for children from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and children with disabilities. Article-6.2.5 of the Policy recognizes the importance of creating enabling mechanisms for providing Children with Special Needs (CWSN) or *Divyang*, the same opportunities of obtaining quality education as any other child (p. 25).

Article 6.10 claims that “ensuring the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in ECCE and the schooling system will also be accorded the highest priority. Children with disabilities will be enabled to fully participate in the regular schooling process from the Foundational Stage to higher education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 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. This Policy is in complete consonance with the provisions of the RPWD Act 2016 and endorses all its recommendations with regard to school education” (p. 26). However, in the very next Article-6.11, NEP, 2020 recommends that “schools/school complexes will be provided resources for the **integration** of children with disabilities, recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training, and for the establishment of resource centres, wherever needed, especially for children with severe or multiple disabilities” (pp. 26-27). It again speaks volumes about negligence of policy-makers about difference between inclusion and integration.

Similarly, Article-14 of the policy talks about equity and inclusion in higher education. It suggests changes in admission process and curriculum keeping inclusion in mind. The focus of the article is on SEDGs and this article is silent about children with disabilities. The approach again confirms inadequacies of the policy towards inclusion and its implementation strategies. To practice inclusion, mere modifications in curriculum and admissions are not sufficient. We need a total overhaul of the entire educational gamut. The policy is also silent on teacher preparation in particular context of implementing inclusive education at all levels and in all educational institutions. Although the policy talks about teacher education in detail for both primary and higher education levels but a clear mandate for preparing teachers equipped with necessary skills to implement

inclusive education at various levels is missing altogether.

Thus, we may conclude that NEP, 2020 seems confused with respect to implementation of inclusive education. On one hand, it recognizes the need for implementing inclusive education at all levels and in all educational institutions but fails to propose enough and adequate measures for its implementation. The planners and practitioners need to take extra precautions while devising implementation strategies for NEP, 2020. A clear focus and a clearer vision is highly desired if we really want to practice inclusive education.

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