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SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION - AWARENESS AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE COMMUNITY AND SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

‘Special needs education (SNE) is highly crucial for all those children and adults with disabilities. In this article, we aim to research the awareness levels of SNE in various schools and communities in the city of Hyderabad, India. A qualitative approach was taken for this purpose. Our research also includes a case study of a special needs child along with his family and academic background, in order to know the degree of awareness among parents.

Key words:

Special needs education,
Learning disabilities,
Individualized Education Program,
Resource Room.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is necessary for every individual. In fact, education is a right of every individual. Education crosses all boundaries laid by men of race, religion, caste, creed and status. In the last century, education systems have evolved in order to reach every man, woman and child in almost every nation. In India, the efforts of great thinkers and philosophers like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Sir Mohammed Iqbal (Allama Iqbal) and Mahatma Gandhi have been devoted towards educating the masses- not just in terms of technical knowledge and expertise but also in the sphere of wisdom, character, personality and passion. These great men along with many more made it their life mission to see that no person was left illiterate due to their financial conditions or social barriers. The Government of India provides a fundamental right to children between the ages of 6 and 14 to acquire free and compulsory education in private institutions or public schools. Although, the nation is still struggling with attaining 100% literacy, we have come a far way.

As per 2011, the World’s average literacy rate stood at 84% and India stood at 74.04%. The Census of 2011 showed that the literacy rate of females during the period of 2001 and 2011 rose from 64.91 to 83.15 percent, with an increase of 18.24 percent, while in the case of men the increase was just 11.18 percent - from 81 to 92.18 percent. Moreover, as per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2012, 96.5% of all rural children between the ages of 6-14 were enrolled in school. There is great change and awareness coming in the education sector. However, amidst strides of educational development, a very distinct segment of education is widely ignored. Not just ignored, denied existence. This segment is Special education for children with disabilities and disorders. Special needs education (SNE) is a method of instruction that is aimed at providing education for all those individuals that have special needs. These needs highly differentiate from person to person. Many people with special needs are excluded from the education system. About 23 million disabled children world wide, particularly in poor and rural areas of developing countries are isolated and denied any form of education. The parents are unaware of their needs and requirements whereas the teachers and schools are blissfully ignorant of identification strategies and instruction techniques

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for such special needs students. In India, the most undetected and easily misjudged special needs are learning disorders. Students with learning disorders appear to be average students with nothing unusual. This is why learning disabilities are referred to as 'hidden disabilities'. Some of these common learning disorders (LD) are:

Dyscalculia- Person's ability to understand numbers, math symbols, count, remember order of numbers, difficulty in reading time etc. is hindered by LD called Dyscalculia.

Dyslexia- Person's reading fluency, decoding, reading comprehension, recall, writing, spelling etc is affected by this LD.

Dysgraphia- Problems of this LD include illegible handwriting, inconsistent spacing, poor spatial planning on paper, poor spelling, and difficulty composing writing as well as thinking and writing at the same time.

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) - Problems of hearing and recognizing sounds and words. Also, the person may be unable to block out background sounds and confuse the order of sounds.

Language Processing Disorder (LPD) – Problems of processing of language: expressive language and/or receptive language.

Dyspraxia- Problems in muscle control, which effects body movement, coordination, language and speech.

ADHD- Problems in concentration and paying attention. It results in difficulty controlling behavior and hyperactivity.

Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities- Person has trouble interpreting non-verbal cues like facial expressions, body language, and may have poor coordination.

Visual Motor Deficit- Problems in seeing the information and replicating it. Poor hand/eye coordination.

Memory- Short-term or Long-term memory problems effects the learning process.

The signs of these Learning disabilities need to be recognized and identified either by parents or teachers. Mostly, the teachers who are responsible for imparting quality education to students should be trained and qualified to identify these LDs and take appropriate measures. Apart from learning disabilities, there are developmental disabilities like

- Speech/Hearing impairment
- Blindness
- Autism Spectrum Disorders (affects communication-verbal/nonverbal and social interaction)
- Emotional disturbances
- Traumatic brain injuries
- Mental Retardation/ Intellectual Disabilities
- Epilepsy
- Orthopedic Impairment (congenital anomalies and diseases- present by birth)

Special education begins by identifying students (children or adults) that have special needs. These individuals may have needs based on learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, speech/hearing impairment, communication disorders and intellectual disability (mental retardation). After identification of the person, an assessment needs to be conducted in various fields of Mathematics, English and Language in order to analyze the root of the problem and target the concerning disability. This also helps to gauge the IQ of the person with special needs. Sometimes, there is intellectual disability or mental retardation due to brain damage/injury or genetic condition. Such cases need to be medically examined along with a psychological assessment.

SNE (Special needs education) can either be provided in mainstream schools or special schools. Mainstreaming special education means educating special needs students along with non-disabled students for certain period of time depending upon their competency. This is a method where the student feels included. The student periodically attends special sessions and classes in a 'resource room' where he receives personalised and customized education and even counseling. However, this method is suitable for students with mild to moderate special needs. Special schooling method is where students with special needs are taught in separate classroom with similar special needs students. The student to teacher ratio is kept very low. For example: 5-6 students for every teacher. In this way, teachers can give individual attention to each student. However, in such schools the special needs students do not get a chance to socialize with non-disabled students or 'normal' students often. This may lead to development of social anxiety.

Review of Literature

According to UNICEF's Report on the Status of Disability in India 2000, there were around 30 million children suffering from some form of disability. The Sixth All-India Educational Survey by NCERT, 1998 reports that of India's 200 million school-aged children (6–14 years), 20 million require special needs education. The 2011 Census of India reveals that 92 percent of the nearly 25 crore households in the country had no people with disabilities. Over 2 crore households had one or more people with disabilities. Shockingly, almost 71 percent of these households were in rural areas while the remaining households were in urban areas. Further, 2011 Census reveals that among the five types of disabilities in India on which data has been collected, disability in seeing (48.5 percent) is the highest, followed by disability in movement (27.9%), Mental (10.3%), Speech disability (7.5%), and Hearing disability (5.8%). The India's Disability Act of 1995 provides facilities for both children and adults with disabilities. Under this Act, children with disabilities have the right to free education until they reach the age of 18 in schools that are integrated or in 'special' schools. Presently, there are 4 national laws in India that pertain to people with disabilities. These are –

- The Mental Health Act of 1987
- The Persons with Disabilities Act
- The Rehabilitation Council of India Act

- The National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities Act of 1999

Research conducted by Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, (2000) showed that in recent years, there has been a significant movement of children with special education needs away from segregated settings into regular classrooms. The research focused on the involvement and participation level of professional teachers that affect the quality of education imparted to special needs students. The research concluded that regular school teachers displayed 'lack of confidence in their own instructional skills and quality of support personnel available to them'. However, teachers were positive and comfortable about integrating only those students with disabling characteristics that do not require extra instructional or management skills from the teacher. According to Avramidis *et al.* (2000), one of the main barriers to the implementation of integrating students with significant learning disabilities has been identified as teachers' attitudes and training. Moreover, teachers identified students with Emotional Behavioral Disorder as being the most difficult to handle and cause the most stress in regular classrooms.

Moreover, research indicates that inclusive education does not necessarily promote positive attitudes for special needs students, unless customized "interaction experiences are planned and the environment is carefully structured" (Jones, 1984). In spite of this, Jenkinson (1998) stated that inclusive education is preferred by many parents across the world in order to promote children's welfare, social integration and safety needs. Research conducted by Niesyn (2009) focused on students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD). He found that a large number of students with EBD are being taught in the general education system without any identification or assessment of their disorder. Typically, traditional teacher education training solely focuses on "preparing teachers to work with students across content domains with less attention given to individual differences or special needs". Regular teachers are not qualified to assess special needs students and develop Individualized Education Program (IEP). Further, Niesyn (2009) concluded that teachers are anxious and overwhelmed when serving students with EBD as they have to adopt various behavior management techniques and customized instruction strategies.

The need for teacher training in special education is highly imperative. Dr. Bradley (2009) states that there are four most important duties of a special educator. These duties are-

- Teach Life Skills- Depending on the severity of the disability, special educators need to teach skills such as personal hygiene, dressing, safety and performing other day-to-day activities. These people are also taught basic workplace activities and trained to perform suitable jobs so that they attain self-sufficiency.
- Facilitate Socialization- Special educators provide inclusive education to special needs students such as dyslexic students are taught alongside average students in order to avoid exploitation or feelings of segregation. However, special attention is given to such needs apart from the general education.
- Provide Academic Education- Special educators prepare an Individual Education Program (IEP) that is customized and tailored according to the students' needs and abilities. Interactive sessions and special accommodations are made so that the student progresses academically as well.
- Modify Student Behavior- Finally, special educators must also train special needs students to behave in a manner that is socially acceptable and considered normal. Certain severely disabled students do have behavioral sense; therefore, it is the duty of the special educator to patiently modify such behavior into socially appropriate behavior.

The Special needs students need to be provided with inclusive education- not just physical but also social inclusion. Research by Jaeger and Bowman (2005) shows that social inclusion is equal access to "all physical places and equal opportunity to access and understand intellectual content". Further, the study concluded that social inclusion is very important for Special needs students as previously, only physical access and facilities were considered as prime factors. Moreover, a study conducted by Crane (2002) defined social inclusion as having positive interactions with the community and maintaining friendships. Such an inclusion resulted in making people with special needs feel like they belong in the society and are a part of it. In spite of this, many people with disabilities are segregated from mainstream society due to prejudice and intolerance (Crane, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research was conducted among various schools in Hyderabad, Telangana in order to know the level of special education awareness in different schools. The purpose of this research was to know the preparation and participation of various schools in imparting special education. Also, research was conducted to know the facilities provided for special needs students within the school. A qualitative approach was taken to conduct this research. Various schools were visited over a period of 2 months, from September to November 2014. The school officials were asked a series of questions regarding special education. Some of these questions were-

1. Does your institute have any awareness about special education?
2. If no, does your institute plan to have any facilities for special education?
3. What are the existing facilities for Special needs students? (Resource room, IEPs, etc)
4. Are students assessed if they display signs of learning disabilities?
5. Are there any campaigns to create special education awareness in the community?

After the interview, permission was taken to carry out some awareness with the students and teachers in the school. Based on this, the responses of schools *without special education facilities* were as follows:

The responses of those schools that already had a resource room and special educators were satisfactory. Special needs children enrolled in these schools were properly trained and supervised. Some schools even trained for vocational jobs and conducted productive workshops. However, in private

institutions, the fee structure was slightly expensive and there were not many schemes that covered education fees for SNE.

Table 1. Remarks regarding resource room teaching and IEP

Serial No.	School Location *	Remark
1	S Public School, Asmangadh	Principal was not available. We made couple of follow up calls to the concerned person but never heard back from them. Status: Not interested
2	C High School, Asmangadh	We met with the Principal, who opined that their school doesn't have special needs kids and besides, they need approval from head office for anything like this. Status: No future plans for SNE
3	S High School, Akber bagh	Busy with some work and would like to listen about special education later. Status: Not interested
4	M G High School, Malakpet	Principal was not available and others were not interested to hear about special education. Status: Not interested
5	S High School, Saidabad	Not much knowledge about special education. Their concern was that putting children in Resource Rooms from regular classes would lead to lack in academic progress as compared to average students. Status: Not willing to accommodate extracurricular lessons.
6	V A, Saidabad	Ready to implement resource room after knowing about special education. Status: Aware and Interested but no existing facility
7	N E M High School, Saidabad	No knowledge about special education but were keen to have us speak with their owner, However when we called back for the same we faced complete rejection from them. Status: Not interested
8	B V, Santosh Nagar	The principal seemed interested and keen but they have the protocol of getting permission from their head office, which will lead to heavy documentation and delay in any near future implementation. Status: Interested but managerial delays.
9	V High School, Santosh Nagar	Ready to start immediate implementation of resource room and IEPs after knowing about special education. Status: Interested and Initiative
10	D High School, DRDO, Santosh Nagar	After several phone calls and a visit, we were called to start our initial practicals. But when we started doing preliminary screening with respective class teachers, mid-way stopped us and we met with the Principal. He was extremely hesitant about this short term assignment because there would be no provision for continuity and this would hamper the student's growth. After much persuasion and explanation he did agree but for a much later date after the exams. Status: Interested but future continuity concerns.
11	F H High School, Asmangadh	After hearing our explanation, they accepted and we were able to carry out screening and special education awareness campaign. Status: Interested and Initiative

*for purpose of confidentiality, school name has not been mentioned.

Research Case

Apart from the awareness of special education in schools and institutions, while performing research work we came across a unique special needs case.

Case Reporter: Husna Habib (Special Educator- LD)

Location: Saidabad, Hyderabad

“During some community interactions, I happened to come across a child of 2nd grade who seemed to be going through some problem and behavioral issues. This disturbed my mind as I was sure that this child was going through some trauma. I set out to meet his family and gather some detailed information. When I spoke to the child's mother, she revealed that the child is very poor in his academics and has some behavioral issues like hyperactivity, dullness in performing regular tasks; instructions need to be repeated etc. I further interviewed his mother to show me some of his books in order to find the reason of his academic frustration. I could make out by his handwriting that the child had some form of disability. His mother was unaware that these were signs of disability and could mean any form of learning disorder. Upon background check of the family, I discovered that the family belonged to a lower middle class and the mother was educated only till Intermediate (10+2) in Urdu medium.

However, upon insistence his mother agreed to send him for academic tuitions. When he came, he was initially hesitant and aloof. I made him feel comfortable and accepted. I used various techniques like talking about his interests, offering him some snacks and playing some games with him. When I asked him targeted questions regarding his school environment, favorite subjects, teachers and friends, he then revealed that

- *He is beaten up by his teachers and parents*
- *Ridiculed by friends*
- *Bullied by kids in his residential colony*

This showed that he felt socially awkward and displayed emotional disturbance in various spheres of life. Coming to academic assessment, I asked him to write English alphabets A-Z. But he didn't write well and skipped many letters. I decided to teach him using the Montessori Method. It took me about 15 days to teach him A-Z without any errors. In the coming days, I observed him deeply and asked him general questions about himself. I noticed he was emotionally disturbed, lacked decision making power, hyper-active and had speech impairment. For professional assessment, I took him to a child psychologist. The report of psychologist assessment showed that he had mild mental retardation. His mental age was 5 years whereas his actual age was 8 years. He had an IQ of 67. When I reviewed the psychological report, I was taken aback. The child displayed no physical signs of mental retardation. The unexpected news haunted my sub-conscious mind. I wondered how many such children are left at large in our 'schools' without proper help. Unfortunately, his parents were unaware about special education. They had no access to professional help and also, the mother's language proved as a hindrance as most of the available literature regarding mental retardation was in English. Moreover, due

to lack of financial freedom, the parents were hesitant to go to reputed institutes that help such special needs students.”

This case has proved that although popular and acclaimed movies like "Taare Zameen Par" and "Barfi" deal with the issue of special education and children with disability, the awareness is still not common among the general public, especially in lower class families and rural areas. We need to acknowledge the need for accepting exceptional children as special and give them the necessary attention.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Offer minimal training in Special education to every Bachelors of Education (B.Ed) student.
- Conduct regular campaigns in public and private schools regarding special education to create awareness among teachers as well as parents.
- Make mandatory 'special needs' assessment before admission of candidate in a school/institute.
- Offer incentives and central government benefits to Special Educators to motivate them.
- Compulsory resource room facility in majority of schools.
- Create disabled children's parents and friends social circle or forum at various platforms so that they can interact and support each other.

Conclusion

All children are valuable and must be provided with the compulsory education. It is truly inspiring to know that that many successful and accomplished people such as famous animator Walt Disney, scientist Albert Einstein, boxer Muhammed Ali, inventor Alexander Graham Bell, writer Agatha Christie, actor Abhishek Bachan - all had some form of learning disabilities. However, they were fortunate to get the right help at the right time. This made a significant difference in their lives which would otherwise, have been lost and struggling. It is the duty of every teacher in the country to

identify students with disabilities and provide them with the appropriate support and attention. And it is our duty as responsible citizens to socially include all those special needs people, either with physical facilities, equal opportunities or just a friendly interaction.

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