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Inclusivity in holistic education: A critical analysis of NEP 2020's approach to special education and differently-abled students

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Abstract

This research article thoroughly analyzes the inclusivity paradigm within the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020, with a specific focus on its approach to special education and the holistic development of differently-abled students. By thoroughly examining policy documents, the study seeks to shed light on the strengths, challenges, and potential gaps in the strategies of NEP 2020 to ensure equal access to comprehensive education for all learners. The study delves into the strategies for implementing inclusive education policies at the grassroots level, considering the perspectives of students with disabilities, their parents, and educators. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of providing customized curriculum, training for teachers, assistive technologies, and support services to ensure the comprehensive growth of students with varying learning requirements. The research aims to contribute nuanced perspectives and constructive recommendations for enhancing the inclusivity of special education within the broader framework of holistic education proposed by NEP 2020. By critically evaluating the policy's impact on differently-abled students' academic, social, and emotional development, this research seeks to inform future policy revisions and implementation strategies, fostering a more inclusive and equitable education system in India.

Keywords: NEP 2020, special education, inclusion, equity, disabilities, differently-abled students.

Introduction

Recognising the importance of inclusive and equitable education is vital in our pursuit of social justice and equality. The Indian education system strives to ensure that every individual has the chance to acquire knowledge and succeed, irrespective of their upbringing or situation. Despite advancements, significant inequalities persist, particularly in secondary and higher education, particularly among Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which include differently-abled children, or *Divyang*, among others. Promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities in education sector development programmes is a key objective of the New Educational Policy (NEP) 2020, aiming to bridge gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes. The NEP 2020 represents a substantial transformation in India's educational system, aiming to provide equal and inclusive education for everyone. This devotion is demonstrated by the policy's emphasis on kids with varying degrees of ability and special education. The Policy acknowledges the significance of establishing facilitating mechanisms to ensure that "Children with Special Needs (CWSN)" or *Divyang* have the same opportunities to participate in a quality education as any other child. This research paper investigates the techniques that NEP 2020 has for special education, the difficulties that it has in its execution, and the influence that it has on differently-abled pupils.

Inclusive Education (IE) is a novel concept that seeks to provide education to children with disabilities in the same facility as their normally developing peers. The primary objectives of the SEN and Disability Act (SENDA) of 2001 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 2005 are to ensure equal access to education and facilities and to prohibit discrimination based on disability among children. The endorsement of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) by the Union Cabinet of India on July 29, 2020, further broadened the extent of inclusive education. Chapter 6 of the National Education Policy 2020 focuses on promoting inclusive and equitable education.

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The National Education Policy of 2020 asserts that education is the most powerful instrument for attaining social justice and equality. It further asserts that every Indian child should have equitable access to education and achievement, without any child being deprived of these opportunities based on their personal background or location of origin.

NEP 2020's Vision for Special Education

Identification of Effective Measures

Furthermore, crucial is considering studies that identify which steps are especially successful for the Children with Special Needs (CWSN) or *Divyang*. For certain students with impairments, for instance, one-on-one instructors and tutors, peer tutoring, open learning, proper infrastructure, and acceptable technology interventions to guarantee access can be very successful.

Inclusion and Equal Participation

Inclusive education is defined by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 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.” The NEP 2020 aligns with the RPWD Act 2016's recommendations on school education, prioritizing the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and the schooling system. This ensures full participation from the Foundational Stage to higher education, ensuring equal opportunities for all children with disabilities.

Training and Sensitization for the Teaching Staff

The policy underscores the necessity of specialized training for teachers to address the varied requirements of classrooms. Teacher education courses would incorporate comprehensive instruction on teaching children with specific impairments, including learning disabilities, to ensure that educators possess the necessary awareness and understanding. The need to foster an empathic and supportive environment in schools is also foregrounded through the implementation of sensitization programs.

Infrastructure and Accessibility

The objective of NEP 2020 is to promote the establishment of inclusive educational facilities, including ramps, disability-friendly restrooms, and assistive technologies. Schools and school complexes shall strive to offer customised accommodations and support systems to meet the specific requirements of all students with disabilities, guaranteeing their complete engagement and integration in the classroom. The objectives of these activities are to remove physical barriers and promote smooth integration for kids with different abilities.

Strategies for Effective Implementation

Early Detection and Intervention

The strategy foregrounds the significance of identifying and intervening with children who have difficulties at an early age. Early assistance has the potential to greatly improve the educational results for individuals with varying degrees of ability. The policy focuses on providing assistance to teachers in order to promptly detect learning difficulties and develop targeted strategies to address them.

Resource Allocation to Schools/School Complexes

Schools and school complexes will receive resources to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities into the teaching and learning environment. It is planned to employ special educators who have received training in cross-disability, and resource centres will be built on an as-needed basis, particularly for children who have severe or multiple impairments. The Right of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act shall be followed in order to guarantee equal access for all children who have disabilities.

Integration of Technology in Teaching-Learning

NEP 2020 places a significant emphasis on the utilization of technology as a means of assisting pupils with varying degrees of ability. Both individualized educational experiences and increased accessibility may be achieved via the utilization of digital tools and assistive technologies. The NEP 2020 will focus on providing assistive devices, technology-based tools, and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials to children with disabilities, enabling easier integration into classrooms and engagement with teachers and peers. This will be applied to all school activities, including arts, sports, and vocational education. High-quality modules will be developed to teach Indian Sign Language and other basic subjects, ensuring safety and security for children with disabilities.

Opportunities for Home Schooling

Children who have multiple impairments are required to have the option of attending normal school or special school, as stipulated by the RPWD Act of 2016. Resource centres and special educators provide assistance to parents in meeting the educational and rehabilitative requirements of these pupils, therefore facilitating the achievement of high-quality home-schooling environments. Children with severe and profound impairments who are unable to attend school continue to have the option of receiving their education at home. It is imperative that children who get their education at home be treated on an equal level with other children who are enrolled in the general education system. There will be evaluations conducted to determine the efficacy and efficiency of home-based schooling.

Reforms in Assessment System

NEP 2020 aims to establish an ecosystem for appropriate assessment and certification for all students with learning disabilities. The proposed National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, will develop guidelines and tools for assessment from foundational to higher education, ensuring equitable access and opportunities for all students with learning disabilities.

Parental and Community Involvement in Education

The NEP 2020 initiative encourages the active participation of parents and members of the community in the education of pupils with varying degrees of ability. Efforts made in collaboration are considered to be essential to provide a helpful learning environment.

Sensitization of the Stakeholders in the Education System

The school education system will ensure all stakeholders, including teachers, principals, administrators, counsellors, and students, are aware of the importance of inclusivity,

equity, respect, dignity, and privacy. The school education system will foster an educational culture that empowers students and enables society to be responsible towards vulnerable citizens. Teachers will be recruited from socio-economically disadvantaged groups to provide excellent role models. The new school culture will be accompanied by changes to the inclusive curriculum, which will include material on human values such as respect, empathy, tolerance, human rights, gender equality, non-violence, global citizenship, inclusion, and equity. This will help students become empowered individuals and contribute to a responsible society.

Additional Actions in the Higher Education Sector

Exclusion is exacerbated in the higher education sector owing to factors such as limited awareness of available options, financial limitations, complex admission procedures, geographical and linguistic obstacles, low employment prospects, and insufficient student support systems. In order to tackle these concerns, it is imperative for all governments and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to implement targeted measures pertaining to higher education.

According to the NEP 2020, Governments should allocate funds for SEDGs education, set higher GER targets, improve gender balance in admissions, establish more high-quality HEIs in aspirational districts and Special Education Zones, develop and support bilingual HEIs, provide financial assistance and scholarships, conduct outreach programs on SEDGs, and develop technology tools for better participation and learning outcomes.

On the other hand, as the Policy envisions, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should reduce opportunity costs, provide financial assistance and scholarships to socio-economically disadvantaged students, conduct outreach on these opportunities, make admissions processes more inclusive, and develop more degree courses in Indian languages and bilingually. They should also ensure wheelchair-accessible facilities, develop bridge courses for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and provide socio-emotional and academic support and mentoring. They should enforce no-discrimination and anti-harassment rules and develop Institutional Development Plans to increase participation from SEDGs.

Difficulties in Effective Implementation

Distribution of Resources

The distribution of sufficient resources for special education is one of the main difficulties that will need to be addressed. When it comes to effective implementation, it is absolutely necessary to make sure that adequate funds are allocated for infrastructure, training, and assistive technology.

Preparedness of the Teachers

Even though the policy places a strong focus on teacher preparation, the degree to which educators are now equipped to deal with special education requirements varies greatly. To provide educators with the requisite abilities, it is vital to engage in professional development that is both comprehensive and ongoing.

Social Stigma

Students with varying degrees of ability may have a more difficult time integrating into regular school due to the

social stigma that is associated with impairments. It is essential to address the attitudes of society through the implementation of awareness programs and inclusive practices.

Impact on Differently-Abled Students

Academic Achievement

Differently abled students have the ability to improve their academic accomplishments via the provision of individualised support and the cultivation of a constructive learning environment through the implementation of inclusive education.

Social Integration

Integration of students with varying abilities into mainstream schools encourages social engagement and acceptance, which in turn assists these kids in the development of critical social skills and an increase in their sense of self-confidence.

Holistic Development

Considering that NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic education, it guarantees that children with varying abilities will have the opportunity to develop in all aspects of their being, including their physical, emotional, and mental development.

Conclusion

The dynamics and causes for excluding socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) from the education system are similar in both school and higher education sectors. Hence, it is imperative to adopt a uniform strategy to ensure fairness and inclusion in both schools and higher education institutions. Moreover, it is essential to maintain consistency across the different phases in order to guarantee long-lasting and effective change. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) presents a progressive vision for inclusive education, emphasizing the integration and assistance of students with varying abilities. Despite the policy's establishment of a resilient framework, successful implementation requires addressing challenges related to resources, teacher readiness, and societal attitudes. NEP 2020 can alter the educational experiences of children with varying abilities, therefore promoting an atmosphere that is both inclusive and equitable for learning. All stakeholders can accomplish this through concentrated efforts.

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