

Nurturing Inclusive Classrooms

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Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 is a path breaking policy document that recognizes five major identities under the broad category of Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDG's) and streamlines all efforts towards equitable and inclusive education. These five identities are gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities and socio-economic conditions. Realizing the cross-cutting nature of equitable and inclusive education, the policy advocates that all aspects of education from foundational stage to higher education should be accessible for "ALL". The system of education should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate and respond appropriately, so that optimum potential of each and every learner can be achieved. The culture and practice of inclusion in education is to be nurtured with the combined efforts of all the stakeholders. ICT and assistive technologies should be cost-effective, supportive of language diversity, respond to individual needs, assist in data-based planning for intervention and goal-setting, and provide solutions for assessment and evaluation. As part of the Shikshak Parv programme, the webinar on "Nurturing Inclusive Classrooms" was organized on 11 September 2021.

Session Highlights

The chairperson of the webinar, Ms. Tarika Roy, Joint Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment gave the introductory remarks. She apprised the viewers that the theme of the webinar "Nurturing Inclusive Classrooms" was chosen with care, to fit the broader theme of the Shikshak Parv - "Quality & Sustainable Schools: Learning from Schools in India". She briefly explained the major provisions of UNCRPD, RPwD Act 2016 and NEP 2020. These rights-based legal instruments are in harmony with each other and facilitate stakeholders to reach out and nurture inclusive classrooms. She highlighted that unlike the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995, which recognized only seven disabilities, the present RPwD Act 2016 recognizes 21 disabilities. This increase in the number of disabilities and inherent diversity in

levels of disabilities within specific categories has enhanced the challenges related to curriculum modifications and examination adaptations. She also delineated the major provisions of NEP 2020 and RPwD Act 2016 such as, zero rejection in admissions, provision of transportation, need-based home-based education to children requiring high support, provision of teaching-learning material in Braille and sign language, holistic progress card and teacher training. She added that children with benchmark disabilities have a right to study in neighborhood schools.

Ms. Roy informed the audience about the recent government initiatives to promote inclusive classrooms such as, the guidelines for extra time and scribes prepared by MSJE, Priya- The Accessibility Warrior an e-comic cum activity book collaboratively brought out by NCERT and DEPwD, MSJE and the launch of 14 early childhood intervention centers in June 2021. She complimented the organizers for the selection of a well-balanced panel, which included a policy maker cum administrator, principal (educational administrator), clinical psychologist and subject expert. She invited the presenter, Ms. Ritu Sain, Director Inclusive Education, Ministry of Education, recipient of PM award and silver medal from President, to share her presentation.

Ms. Sain began her presentation by emphasizing on “Leaving no child behind and Learning for All”. She gave an overview of NEP 2020 from the perspective of equitable and inclusive education. She focused on the Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDG’s) as clientele of inclusive education. She then rationalized the need for inclusive classrooms with the help of UDISE data for 2019-20 and pointed out that 22,49,127 children with special needs (CWSN) are already enrolled in the schools however only 23.17% of CWSN enrolled in primary school are able to complete education up to class 12. She explained that inclusive classrooms should provide a meaningful and conducive learning environment for all students regardless of ability, inclusive teaching practices, accessible environment, inclusive curriculum and adaptations, child-centric pedagogy and peer support. She shared a three-pronged mantra for inclusive classrooms - inclusion for whom, why it is needed and how it is to be done. She shared success stories of students from the states such as – Manomoy Hira (Andaman & Nicobar Island), Rekhadi Raju (Assam), Ripsita Nag (Tripura) and Thaikunj Kinglin (Manipur). Each one, she mentioned, is a shining example that if support and provisions are implemented in the right manner, it can lead to favorable outcomes. She also told about a girl with muscular dystrophy from Karnataka, who has topped in the board examination. Ms. Sain ended her presentation by saying that inclusive classroom will pave

the way to an inclusive society. Ms. Roy appreciated Ms. Sain's informative presentation, which covered crucial aspects of inclusivity, the strategies required and how to make learning joyful for all learners. She then invited the next speaker Dr. Sudha Acharya, Principal, ITL Public School, Delhi to give her presentation.

Dr. Acharya started her presentation by saying that she will share inclusive practices from "ground zero" that is her school. She emphasized that inclusive education is all about involvement and empowerment where the inherent worth and dignity of all learners is recognized. She added that the difference between the traditional and inclusive classroom can be identified in terms of educational philosophy, instructional strategies and resource support to learners. She highlighted the role of school leader in creating inclusive classrooms. The major tasks for a school leader lies in the domain of facilitating dissemination of information, culture and climate building, sensitizing the support staff, teacher empowerment and knowledge upgrade, building peer leadership, early identification, barrier-free environment, collaboration with stakeholders, development of inclusive education practices with the adoption of high-5 learnings (theatre, visual performing arts, puppet, storytelling and sports). She ended her deliberations by saying that inclusive classrooms should be available, affordable and accessible. In her school the focus is on sensory integration, multimodal assessment, and vocational education and life skills education. Ms. Roy thanked Dr. Acharya for sharing the bird's eye view perspective on the whole gambit of inclusivity from a head teacher's perspective. She then introduced Ms. Sunita Chavare, Air Force School, Pune and invited her to share her presentation.

Ms. Chavare's presentation focused on the ten-step model of inclusive education being followed in her school. She mentioned that till date her school has witnessed 15 success stories of children with mild to moderate disabilities. The ten steps discussed in detail during her presentation included: identification and assessment; teacher training; instructional strategies which are multi-sensorial and based on VAKT; Individualized Reasonable Accommodation Support Plan (IRASP); one-on-one therapy sessions; counseling for parents and children; classroom modification; curriculum modification; examination modification; and encouraging participation in all school events with significant sharing of responsibilities. She also shared a story of how making teachers sensitized and aware about the causes and concerns of specific learning disabilities brought success in the life of a child with learning disabilities. She concluded by saying that if all the stakeholders involved in school education take small steps, then it is a team journey to reach the goal of inclusive education. Ms. Roy

thanked Ms. Chavare and invited the last speaker Mr. Sanjeev Kumar, Lecturer, DIET Shamlaghat, Himachal Pradesh to speak.

Mr. Kumar started by sharing an overview of his presentation and stating that more important than his presentation is the demonstration of the teaching learning aids developed by him. He informed the viewers about his initiatives under Rashtriya Aavishkaar Abhiyan (RAA) which can be seen in the form of Mathematics Laboratory on Wheels. He remarked that mathematics is often considered a difficult subject by some in school, and mathematics teachers often do not get due respect and recognition within the school system. He has made 75 mathematical teaching aids and instruments to cater to the diverse learning needs of children in inclusive classrooms. The teaching learning aids in his mathematics laboratory include –make number while you play, mathematical table, ascending and descending numbers, missing numbers, addition and subtraction window board, time in watch, magnetic magic strips, electro mental mathematics with 20 worksheets aiding in achievement of more than 20 learning outcomes. He demonstrated the use of most of his teaching instruments. He ended by saying that “if one is ready to learn, they will fall in love with mathematics!” Ms. Roy appreciated the enthusiasm, time and effort spent by Mr. Kumar in developing these strategies for promoting inclusive education.

Question & Answer Session

The presentations were followed by a question-and-answer session moderated by the chairperson. The chairperson put up selected questions received on the MyGov portal from the public. Ms. Roy asked what are the plans for developing the capacity of regular and special teachers? Ms. Sain responded that the pandemic has forced us into virtual mode of teacher training and this has to be visualized in continuous mode and not restricted to earning a certificate. For this, there is a need to strengthen the provisions under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. She stated that the Ministry of Education is working on developing an e-platform for common sharing of resources for multiplier effect. Dr. Acharya added that teachers need to consciously update their skills and knowledge. This can be done with the help of material available at NCERT and CBSE websites. She pointed out that even a school with a single special teacher and counselor can manage teacher training and onsite hand-holding, if the special teacher and counselor is ready to think out of the box to sensitize fellow colleagues and use the various resources at their disposal.

Ms. Roy asked Ms. Chavare that if the student teacher ratio is high, how can the needs of all students be accommodated in the limited amount of time? Ms. Chavare replied that this can be managed effectively through team work between the special teachers, counselors, parents and peers. She emphasized that the effective pre-teaching planning in the form of lesson plans, with multiple alternative options for student engagements is the key to achieve success in this situation.

Ms. Roy asked Mr. Kumar that while inclusive classroom is a good concept, will it adversely affect the learning of other children? Mr. Kumar assured the viewers that it will not affect the learning of other students adversely, who may not have any identified special education need. It will encourage the learning of all as the inclusive pedagogy practices are based on joyful learning and hands on learning.

Concluding Remarks

The chairperson concluded the session by highlighting that the NEP, 2020 has conceived inclusive education in a beautiful manner wherein it encourages the content teacher and the special teacher to break their silos and come together to work in collaboration. Equal opportunities for lifelong learning for all must start with teachers. She stated that synergies need to be built and peer participation and parent engagement should be initiated. She remarked that at present, the time is right and the entire teachers' fraternity needs to begin taking appropriate steps to make the concept of inclusive education a reality. Ms. Roy concluded the webinar by thanking all the viewers and participants for joining from across the country and wishing Happy Shikhshak Parv to all.