

Viability of Open Schooling for Special Children

NEELAM SINHA

National Open School, New Delhi, India

Abstract: *The children who differ from the majority of children and who have physical, mental and behavioral or sensory characteristics, may require special education and related service to develop their capacity.*

Individual attention, age applicable for admission, course-materials, rigidity of science and arts subject option, requirement of attendance, evaluation procedure etc. of a formal institution throws a number of constraints for any learner with disability to follow any academic course in a formal institution.

There is a need to develop a flexible educational programme with structured curriculum comparable to the formal system designed to meet the varied and changing need of children with disabilities. The challenging task may be covered only through extension of open learning system.

Flexibility in the selection of subject, selection of study - center, credit accumulation, evaluation and certification of open learning system will encourage children with disabilities to be attached and to take full advantage of the system.

Fundamentals of Special Education

If asked to a teacher or school administrator how schools should serve children, the response would probably include the comment that school programmes should respond to the individual differences of the children who are enrolled. Almost everyone thinks this is a desirable goal for a school system. It is easy to state a goal but achieving it can be very hard.

In today's changing educational scenario, more and more students with disabilities are being expected to attain world class education. But this cannot be achieved without providing support for general and special education teachers who are expected to make this happen. How to make the educational experiences of such learners more productive and successful is the prime objective.

Students with special needs are found in formal as well as in special education classes. A student in a special school while comparing their education with that of formal institutions who were not for the disabled, spoke only of the disadvantages. They mention, subjects like science which they never studied, books were not available, assignments were made too easy, expectation of their capacity were too low. The system entitles disabled students to access quality education.

Special Education in Perspective

The children who differ from the majority of children and who have physical, mental, behavioural or sensory characteristics, may require special education and related services to develop to their maximum capacity. This category includes children with communication disorders, hearing disorders, visual impairments, physical disabilities, mental retardation, learning disabilities, behaviour disorders, multiple handicaps, high intelligence and unique talents. There are technical differences in meaning among a number of terms. They may broadly be classified in the following terms:

Impairments refer to diseased or defective tissue. For example, lack of oxygen at birth may cause brain damage or neurological impairment that will result in cerebral palsy. Similarly, a birthmark could be considered an impairment because it is different from the tissues that surround it.

Disability refers to the reduction of function, or the absence of a particular body part or organ. A person who has an arm or leg missing has a physical disability. Similarly, someone who cannot control the muscles required for speech has a disability in communication. The terms disorder and disfunction are frequently used as synonyms for disability.

Handicap refers to the problems that impaired or disabled people have when interacting with their environment. A Vietnam veteran who is confined to a wheelchair put it this way: "Sure I have a disability; but I'm not handicapped-until I try to get into a building that has a flight of steps and a revolving door as its only entrance."

It should be noted that many people treat these terms as synonyms.

Hearing Impaired: By far the most serious effect of early significant hearing impairment is that it limits language learning; if hearing impairment is not detected and special education not begun, the handicapping potential of hearing impairment is compounded. If, during the early years, hearing impaired children do not learn to use and understand language, their intellectual and educational growth is retarded (Horton, 1976).

Visually Impaired: Infants who are blind from birth often have problems relating to adults and to objects. Blindness also delays controls of the hands and gross motor development. Studies have indicated that blind children who received early education services show smaller developmental delays than other blind children (Adelson and Friberg, 1975, Fraiberg, 1975),

Physically Disabled: Scherzer (1974) noted that, although cerebral palsy is a difficult condition to diagnose in infants, it is no longer acceptable to adopt a "wait and see" policy before planning intervention. Both parents and physical therapists need to be included in the educational programs for such children. The value of such programs was demonstrated by Koch (1958), who did a follow-up study of cerebral palsied children who had participated in a nursery school program. His results showed that better long-term results were achieved by children who had early treatment than by those for whom treatment was postponed.

Mentally Retarded: La Crosse (1976) stated that sending mentally retarded children to

nursery school can encourage them to enter group activities at a time when their differences from the normal groups are not very distinct or severe, and when society is more willing to accept them. Parent-child relationships are likely to improve as young mentally retarded children become less dependent, less fearful and less burdensome.

The early studies of mentally retarded children (Kirk, 1958; Skeels, 1966; Skeels and Dye, 1939) provide convincing evidence of the effectiveness of early education in raising IQ scores and improving social behaviour. More recently the multidisciplinary pre-school programme for Down's syndrome children at the University of Washington has provided a model of effective early childhood educational practices for children whose mental retardation stems from an organic cause. In this programme each child serves as her own control; current performances are compared to earlier progress, so that all identified children may participate fully. The mean developmental lag was reduced from 21 to 5.6 months for children in the programme, and participating children mastered designed tasks as well (Hayden and Ditriev, 1975). In 1977 Hayden, Morris, and Bailey reported that 34 percent of the programme graduates were doing well in their regular public school classes. This programme has clearly established not only the effectiveness of early and continuous education, but also its cost effectiveness and efficiency in terms of the children's later placements.

Learning Disabled: Although it has been argued that identifying learning disabled children at an early age may lead to unnecessary labeling and stigmatizing (Hayden and Edger, 1977), there have been efforts to define the characteristics of the population and begin early intervention (Keogh, 1970). Learning disabilities are suspected when a written or spoken language problem has no obvious cause, such as deafness or mental retardation. Most young children are not expected to read, speak or do arithmetic, but their problems may be no less apparent in their thinking, talking, or listening (Wallace and McLaughlin, 1975).

Early childhood education may eliminate or reduce the severity of specific learning disabilities before children are required to learn academic subjects (Wallace and McLaughlin, 1975). But despite the need for services, especially for children with severe problems, programmes for children with early symptoms of learning disabilities are very scarce.

Behavior Disorders: Children who have disorders present particular difficulties at home. For this reason, early intervention programmes for these children place a special emphasis on the role of parents. One such program is at the Rutland Center in Athens, Georgia. In this programme parents are provided information about the children's progress and needs and assisted in implementing complementary home programmes (Shearer and Shearer, 1977). Of the graduates from this programme, 65 percent were placed on regular elementary classes and the remainder were placed in nurseries, kindergartens, and special classes (Karnes and Zehrback, 1997a).

Multiple Handicapped: Appell (1977) reported that deaf-blind children are extremely vulnerable to developmental delay. Without early diagnosis and intervention most will never achieve their full potential. Despite the expense and other requirements of early instruction Appell stated, "Saving an infant and family in crisis from further depriva-

tion, dissolution and disruption more than justifies the cost and the effort expended" (p. 163)

Gifted: Efforts to help gifted children achieve to the extent of their abilities are just as important as efforts to help other exceptional children. Because children establish their individuality and a strong healthy identity in their early years (Torrance, 1974), educational services should be begun as soon as children reveal their distinctiveness. Gifted children among the handicapped may be particularly hard to identify, but the results of serving them may be outstanding.

In addition to the studies just mentioned early childhood education for exceptional children also provides assistance and support to parents of the children. They can receive emotional support from other parents, models for working with their own children, and specific suggestions for ways that they can assist in the education of their children.

Students who take longer to learn, who have several difficulty in learning, who exhibit disruptive behavior, who have several physical problems their interference with learning who are exceptionally intelligent or talented all have needs that are not met by the general education programme. They need programmes designed to suit their needs.

Special education is instruction designed for students with disability or gifts and talents who also have special learning needs. Some of these students have difficulty learning in regular classrooms; they need special education to function in school. Others generally do well in regular classrooms, but they need special education to help them master certain skills to reach their full potential in school.

A 'disability' results from a medical, social or learning difficulty that interferes significantly with the student's normal growth and development, such as the ability to profit from schooling experiences or the ability to participate successfully in work activities. Special education is an effort of society's willingness to recognize and respond to the individual needs of students and the limits of regular school programmes to accommodate those needs.

Some need special services because of what they are not able to do, because some disabling conditions limit their ability to learn in the typical educational programme. Students who are blind, for example may need to be taught to read in Braille or by means of large print books. Students who cannot read instruction in a manual sign language may go through some other special and psychological challenges.

By dealing with these diverse needs, special education has become a sophisticated series of educational alternatives that is considered the right of every student with disabilities.

Legal Basis for Special Education

Education is the beginning of empowerment. Special attention is required to be given to the education of persons with disabilities. A comprehensive countrywide sample survey of persons with disabilities was undertaken by National Sample Survey Organi-

zation (NSSO) in 1991 to estimate the magnitude of the persons with disabilities in India. About 1.9 percent of the total population of the country, i.e. 16.15 million persons have physical and sensory disabilities. There are 1200 special schools for the disabled in India which have an enrolment of about 55, 000 disabled students. Specialized services are available primarily in urban areas.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Education has formulated a scheme known as Integrated Education for Disabled children (IEDC) to provide educational opportunities for disabled children in the schools.

National Policy on Education 1986 called for integration of "The physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage the confidence". The Plan of Action (POA), 1992 estimates that about 10.39 million children with disabilities are to be provided education in the school system. Out of these, about half a million require vocational training.

Govt. of India has set up 47 Special Employment Exchange and 41 Special Cells in the normal Employment Exchange. The objective of the scheme is to help the handicapped persons in getting gainful employment. Over 49,000 persons have been given placement through these Special Employment Exchange and Special Cells.

In 1988, in UNESCO Consultation on Special Education had recognized that the responsibility for special education was that of the total education system. It stated that there should not be two separate systems of educational provision. Yet, Special Schools in India come under the purview of the Welfare Ministry while Integrated Education is the responsibility of the Department of Education, MHRD.

Ministry of Welfare has also launched a scheme - Establishment of Special Schools with 90 percent financial assistance from the ministry. Govt. has been giving awards in the form of scholarships to disabled and the orthopaedically handicapped students.

In 1983 World Programme of Action, the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Declaration on 'Education for All', Equalization of opportunities and 1994, the Salamanca statement - all focus on the child with special needs.

All this demands flexible educational programmes designed to meet the varied and changing needs of such students. Vocational education in special and integrated setting in an essentiality to today's education.

Special Education in the Context for National Open School

National Open School has been accrediting formal institutions as its study centers to implement the Academic and Vocational Programmes for Foundation, Secondary and Senior Secondary courses. But still a large number of different target groups of persons like disabled children, street children and labourers are out of the school boundary. Education as a fundamental right entitles persons from different background to have access to a quality education. To make educational experiences a more productive and successful venture for each learner is the prime objective of the National Open School.

Education may be delivered in a variety of settings, depending on the needs of a child. Some children may be enrolled in regular classes where teacher receives help from specialists. Some require placement in full-time special institutions. Any NGO or Government institution catering to the special needs of the children, may be given accreditation by NOS and termed as Special Study Centres. Special Study Centers will be the centers arranged for providing learning support to all types of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of the society and extend special learning support to them.

Many people imagine that the techniques and materials used in special education can not be used in other areas of education as well. By the same token, some believe that the practices of regular education are unsuitable for teaching people with disability or special needs. Open schooling may be provided to any group of children at any given circumstances. Whether at home or at special schools, organizations, learning materials and audio-video cassettes may reach at their door steps. Curriculum may also be modified according to the need of a special child. For example, hearing impairment often limits the child's general vocabulary development and restricts awareness of phonetic structure of words. Special teachers may help in the amendment of the existing curriculum by supplying carefully structured phonic approach to develop the skill. A lesson of such learners should be spread over several short sessions. In this context only it is required that some of the more desirable subjects may be developed by a special teacher.

Flexibility in the Selection of Subject

In the open learning system, the best part is the flexibility in the selection of subjects in order of one's interest, preference or capability. A learner may opt from a wide range of academic or vocational courses. In pursuing an academic course, it is not necessary to follow the strict categorization of a Science and Arts Course which is being followed in the formal system.

Selection of the Study Centre

There are about 675 study centers (AIs) to implement the academic courses for Foundation, Secondary and Sr. Secondary levels. Open vocational centers which are called Accredited Vocational Institutions (AVI) are attached with the Shramik Vidyapeeth or Vocational Institutions and are about 170 in number. The Special Study Centers (20) will deal with the children with disabilities and the disadvantaged group of society with the special provision and learning support at these institutions.

These different kinds of Study Centers provide learners with an option to opt for the type of study centers they will be associated with. Since these centers are spread all over the country, they will be easily accessible to them.

Personal Contact Programme

The children with learning problems, handicaps and disabilities are more like non-handicapped children. They may have some special needs but their general needs are identical to those of other children. Just good basic teaching procedures if applied with commonsense and precision, work miracles. But these categories of learners will need a longer period of Contact Sessions. In such sessions only academic inputs may be

promoted among the learners with the help of print materials, teaching aids and audio-videocassettes. A learning unit may be programmed in the computer for the learners to explore further on a given unit. This will lead them from simple to complex concepts. Special teachers will require a better remuneration for handling special children.

Evaluation

The National Open School holds examinations twice a year. A student may appear in any of the examinations and may offer one or more subjects at one or more times and thus pace oneself according to the time at his disposal. After the completion of a course, the Special Study Centers may evaluate the learners internally and declare them successful.

Credit Accumulation

The NOS allows credit accumulation. Each time a student passes in a subject, the credit is kept till he/she fulfills the eligibility conditions for certification within a prescribed period of five years with nine chances. In place of grades or credits, special learners may also be given different incentives to motivate them.

Certification

At the completion of a course or a vocational programme, Special Study Centers may be provided with a question bank to assist learners to practice writing a lesson or assignment and evaluating them at the study - centers. As no external examination is required for such learners, the concept of joint certificate may be encouraged to be given to the successful learners.

The above flexibilities and openness is an inherent characteristic of the open learning system which will go in favour of the children with disabilities.

References

- Horton, K.B. (1976) *Early Interventions for having Impaired infants and Young Children*, Baltimore University: Park Press.
- Adelson, E and Fraiberg, S. Gross (1975) Motor development in infants blinds from birth, *Exceptional Infant*, 3.
- Scherzer, A.L. (1974) Early diagnosis, management and treatment of cerebral palsy, *Rehabilitation Literature*, July.
- Kirk, S.A. (1977) *General and Historical Rationale for Early Education of the Handicapped*, New York, Walker an Company.
- Appell, M.W. (1977) *Infants Stimulation Programming for the Deaf-Blind*. California State Dept. of Educ. 1977