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Education of Children with Disabilities in Rural Indian Government Schools: A Long Road to Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Global commitments to the education of children with disabilities, have led to progressive policy developments in India, and a surge in the enrolment of children who were traditionally excluded from the formal education system. This paper examines the perceptions and practices of mainstream teachers in rural government schools, within the context of increased learner diversity, focusing on how teachers understand, and respond to, the needs of children with disabilities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations, in six primary schools, in three districts of Haryana. Our findings suggest that deficit-oriented views dominated teacher thinking, but they showed a readiness to engage with disability issues, recognising the value of education for all. However, they struggled in their classroom practices in relation to meeting diverse learner needs and exclusionary practices were further amplified for children with disabilities. Teachers were unwilling to take responsibility for the learning of children with disabilities, expressing significant concerns about their own preparedness, while highlighting the lack of effective and appropriate support structures. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the pressing need for effective teacher professional development opportunities and other support structures, to provide quality education.

KEYWORDS

Disability; inclusive education; India; rural; Global South; teachers

Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), focused attention on the education of children and young people with disabilities, particularly in the global South. The push towards fulfiling the promise of education for all, and leaving no one behind, has resulted in a sharp increase in children traditionally kept out of the formal education system, now accessing schools in many countries. This paper focuses on India, a country with a rich and progressive policy landscape, where there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children with disabilities enrolling in mainstream schools. Recent data shows that 61% of children with disabilities aged between 5–19 years are attending an educational institution (UNESCO, 2019), compared to the dismal figure of less than 2% in 2001–2002 (Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2002). Yet there is little understanding of how these policy developments are impacting classroom

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pedagogical processes, teachers' understandings of increasing diversity, and student experiences.

This paper examines the perceptions and practices of teachers in rural government schools, in a context of increased learner diversity, and with a specific focus on children with disabilities. The findings show small but significant shifts in the field and help identify the current challenges and enabling opportunities in the educational system. In conclusion, we highlight the urgent need for more inclusive and effective professional development opportunities and increased support networks for teachers.

Including Children with Disabilities in India

International mandates and policy proclamations have spurred changes at the national level in India. Over the last 25 years, numerous laws and policies have directly impacted the education of persons with disabilities (see Table 1).

Critically important has been the Right to Education Act (Ministry of Law and Justice [MLJ], 2009), which is legally binding, and a 2012 amendment categorised children with disabilities under 'disadvantaged group'. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (Ministry of Law and Justice [MLJ], 2016), underscored the government's commitment to inclusive education, stating: 'Students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities' (Section 18 of 23).

These laws and policies have been implemented through a number of national programs (see Table 2), focusing on different stages of schooling- primary (years 1 to 8) and/or secondary (years 9–12).

The most recent, *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, oversees the implementation of the Right to Education Act from pre-school to Year 12. It has a broader goal to improve school effectiveness in terms of equal opportunities, and equitable learning outcomes and

Table 1. Laws and policies addressing education of children with disabilities.

The Persons with Disabilities Act	1995	Provision of free education for every child with disability up to 18 years of age in an appropriate setting
Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities	2005	Inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in mainstream education
National Policy for Persons with Disabilities	2006	Ensure inclusion and effective access to education to children with disabilities
Inclusive Education of the Disabled at Secondary Stage	2009	Inclusive education of the disabled children in grade 9–12
Right to Education Act	2009	Free and compulsory education for all children between 6–14 years, including those with disabilities
The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act	2016	Free and compulsory education for 6–14-year olds' with disabilities

Table 2. Key national programmes focusing on children with disabilities.

Name of the programme	Implementation years	Level of schooling
District Primary Education Programme	1994–2002 (with disability being addressed since 1997)	Primary
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan	2001–2018	Primary
Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan	2013–2018	Secondary
Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan	2018- ongoing	Primary and secondary

aims to 'enable all children and young persons with disabilities to have access to inclusive education and improve their enrolment, retention and achievement in the general education system' (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2018, p. 61).

Furthermore, the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* states that, 'general schoolteachers will be sensitised and trained to teach and involve children with special needs in the general classroom' (p.61). This is not a new idea, as teacher training has been mentioned as a facilitative measure for inclusive education since the 1995 Persons with Disabilities Act (MLJ, 1995). Another strategy adopted across policies has been the provision of 'resource teachers' to support mainstream teachers in educating children with disabilities. Under the *Sarva Shikshya Abhiyan* these were referred to as Inclusive Education Resource Teachers, while under the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, they are termed as Special Educators (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2011).

An acknowledgement of the important role of the teachers in the inclusion of children with disabilities, is also evident in the steadily growing body of research literature in India. Majority of these studies can be grouped under two main themes: teacher attitudes, and perceived barriers. A study of trainee teachers' attitudes and concerns around the inclusion of children with disabilities found that although they had positive attitudes, the lack of classroom resources was a concern (Sharma, Moore, & Sonawane, 2009). Studies using both attitude surveys and qualitative interviews have captured a positive shift in teacher attitudes towards children with disabilities, with neutral and moderate attitudes towards inclusive education (Kalita, 2017; Srivastava, De Boer, & Pijl, 2017). However, significant concerns have been highlighted in the implementation of inclusive education (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013; Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2016) due to large class sizes, poor infrastructure, lack of support staff, and limited knowledge and teaching methods to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities (Shah et al., 2016).

Despite recognising teachers as key facilitators in the delivery of education, little attention has been paid to teachers' classroom practices and experiences. The focus of many studies has remained on attitude surveys, rather than the actual implementation of inclusive education. Only a handful of studies in the Indian context (e.g. Jha, 2010; Singal, 2008; Taneja Johansson, 2015; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015) have focused on teacher practices but these have been limited to urban, private schools. This is problematic, given that of the approximately 5 million children with disabilities, between 0–14 years, 72% reside in rural areas (UNESCO, 2019).

Compared to urban settings, rural schools face particular challenges, including lack of resources, in terms of facilities and non-teaching staff; poor school infrastructure; and a shortage of teachers, especially well-trained ones, as working in these schools is not seen as particularly attractive (Bawane, 2019). Inadequate training, combined with cumbersome administrative duties, and shortages of non-teaching staff, have resulted in multi-grade classrooms, a high student-teacher ratio, and a poor standard of education and learning outcomes in many rural schools (Annual Status of Education Report [ASER], 2018). To address some of these issues, this paper investigates teachers' perceptions and practices in rural government schools.

Research Approach

The data in this article comes from a larger multi-methods project. In this paper we draw specifically on extensive, in-depth qualitative data, collected in six rural government primary schools across three districts: Jind, Kaithal and Fatehabad, in the northern state of Haryana. Following a baseline quantitative survey across 36 schools, we identified schools with the highest enrolment of children with disabilities, of which, two schools per district were selected. Following receipt of ethical permissions from local education authorities, school heads, and teachers, a team of two trained researchers carried out data collection in all the six schools.

In these schools, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers of classes 3, 4 and 5, in the local language. It included demographic information (e.g. caste, disability status, gender) and questions covering themes, such as strategies used to identify and support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, understanding of learner diversity, reflections on their teaching practices and experiences of teaching children with disabilities.

Semi-narrative classroom observations of Mathematics and Hindi lessons were carried out in classes 4 and 5, by the two researchers simultaneously. We focused on 4 and 5 to ensure efficient use of limited time for data collection and recorded a total number of 36 observations, equally distributed for Mathematics and Hindi. During each classroom observation, one observer focused on pre-selected children: two high performing (identified using scores on tests administered as part of the larger project), two low performing students, and a child with disability. The other observer focused on the teacher, who was the same person who had been interviewed previously. All observations were conducted by the same pair of researchers to enhance reliability. The two observation tools (child focused, and teacher focused) together recorded details on the following:

a) The chronology of events in the classroom in the form of bullet points.
b) The quality of teacher-child interactions for each of the observed children: child's level of engagement, teacher's response to the child, materials used by the child, their peer interactions.
c) Teacher sensitivity and responsiveness to learning needs particularly for those struggling with learning, by noting whether the teacher noticed students' difficulties or lack of understanding, kind of individualised support (if any), attempts made to include all children, particularly those with disabilities.
d) Lack of sensitivity and responsiveness: evidence of the teacher failing to notice or ignore students' needs, violent responses (such as yelling, humiliation or physical punishment), excluding children particularly those with disabilities.

Observations were recorded in narrative form. Additionally, a figural representation of the classroom seating plan was drawn which also identified where the 'observed' children were seated and a checklist of resources (e.g. desks, chairs, windows, fan, dustbin, teaching learning materials) was also completed.

The length of the lessons varied between 20–60 minutes, as there was no fixed timetable in these schools. In total, the qualitative data consisted of 18 teacher interviews, 26 hours of classroom observation and field notes.

Four of the six primary schools were in a compound alongside a middle and/or higher secondary school, and two were standalone primary schools. Peons, security and cleaning staff are allotted only to secondary schools, and thus the two primary schools did not have any non-teaching staff. Therefore, teachers' responsibilities in these schools included ensuring that children did not leave the school grounds, and personally delivering various school reports to higher officials. The total number of children in the six schools ranged between 94 and 253, with the pupil teacher ratio in classrooms ranging between 24 and 43.

Of the 18 teachers interviewed, 13 were male and five were female (reflective of the gender composition in the larger sample); and they all had formal qualifications for teaching primary school.

All data were translated from the local language (predominantly Hindi) into English by the two researchers who were involved in the data collection and transcribed, with a third person check for consistency and reliability of translation. Data analysis was conducted by two team members using QSR-NVivo to allow for transparency and easy sharing of coded data. Guided both by an initial immersion in the data and the literature, a codebook was developed, piloted and finalised. Initial trawl through the data focused on first level coding which entailed basic descriptive coding. This was then followed by a focus on organising the initial coded ideas to identify key concepts in analysis. Finally, working through the codes, a more analytical approach was undertaken to pull together broader themes, identify key concepts and overarching similarities and differences in the data (Neuman, 2014).

Findings

In presenting our findings, we begin by engaging with the reasons that teachers identified as important for educating children with disabilities, as these perceptions are most likely to shape their practices. Subsequently, we focus on classroom practices as articulated by the teachers, and also as observed during lessons, highlighting the considerable tensions inherent in teachers' articulation and implementation of practices.

Being in School Matters

All teachers stressed on the importance of children with disabilities attending school. Teachers' comments included: ' … education is important for everyone' (I_F_B_4)[1]; 'Education is important for all be it disabled children or regular children' (I_F_A_5); and ' … they also have the right to get educated' (I_J_B_3).

When elaborating on the benefits, teachers related education to earning a living and being financially independent.

> Education is important for everyone. More so for the disabled kid, so that they can study well and learn and get a job and earn their living in the future and don't need to depend on others. (I_K_B_5)

Education was also perceived by teachers as a stepping-stone to increased self-reliance, and independence. As noted by another teacher: 'They need to be educated so that they do not become a burden on parents and society and become independent'

(I_J_A_4). Education was thus considered vital for persons with disabilities, enabling them to lead an independent life. Some teachers linked the benefits to greater social acceptance, especially for girls: 'Now if a girl is disabled and is earning, she can still get married because groom's side will see that at least she will earn money' (I_K_A_4).

Additional themes emerged, such as focusing on the value of being in school, as an antidote to perceived feelings of inadequacy that children with disabilities might face: 'We need to educate them, so they do not develop inferiority complex in themselves' (I_J_A_4).

While teacher narratives strongly supported children with disabilities being in school, there were clear differences in the type of learning expectations depending on the type of disability. For some children with disabilities teachers believed that mere physical presence was sufficient. Referring to a child with intellectual disabilities, a teacher noted: 'At least he will gain something, even if he can't read or write, he can listen, behaviour changes, it's better than sitting at home' (I_F_A_4). This was a commonly articulated view and it had a significant impact on the learning opportunities provided (or not provided) to some children, as discussed later in this paper.

Notions of (Dis)ability

Teachers commonly described 'disability', as a physical and/or mental deficit, emphasising that the individual was lacking in some way:

> One can say someone is disabled when there is any deficiency in the body for instance. Disability can be of any type; it can be mental as well as physical (I_K_B_3).

Thirteen teachers alluded to the 'degree of disability' to describe the severity or impact of the disability on the individual's ability to participate in learning opportunities offered in the classroom. As indicated in the quote below:

> Someone who is 100% disabled, and someone who is less disabled, there are variations in their capabilities, the latter can do some work, but the one who is 100% disabled mentally and physically is unable to do any work. (I_F_A_5)

Low expectations of children with disabilities were particularly evident in relation to teachers' claims regarding the learning potential of certain children.

> Many types of disabled are there: someone with orthopaedic disability has no difficulty in studying. But mentally challenged ones can get admission but cannot ever attain the standard learning achievement levels. Similarly, for those with problems in hearing or speech, also, cannot attain normal levels of proficiency. (I_K_A_5)

Parallels were frequently drawn between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

> But if someone is disabled, physically by limbs, the ones we call handicapped there is not much of a problem in teaching them . . . they can study like normal kids and work normally. (I_J_B_5)

> See, the ones who are MR [mental retardation], they are completely different and cannot adjust with them. Others, who are disabled in terms of hearing or vision, speech etc. they are same as other children except for their specific disability. (I_K_A_5)

Despite mentioning disability as limiting the learning potential of children, teachers frequently acknowledged that with appropriate support those with disabilities can reach their potential. In doing so they drew on examples of successful adults with disabilities.

> I have seen those with disabilities cannot be said to be less than others in any way. An employee at an Indian bank has no hands but he operates the computer so fast that even a person with hands would be unable to keep up. The disabled are capable in every matter, provided they are given the facilities they need. (I_J_A_5)

Additionally, all teachers were very cognisant of government benefits and the importance of a certified disability:

> All these differently abled children get a separate scholarship. They get a monthly cheque of Rs 1000/-. They get more support but only those who have a medical certificate (more than 70% disability) are entitled to this scholarship. (I_K_A_3)

During interviews, teachers used different words to describe disability, often reflecting on what terminology was more acceptable and appropriate. Some teachers used '*divyang*', a term which has recently gained currency in India. In numerous interviews, teachers corrected the interviewer's terminology: 'Don't call them *viklang* (handicapped), they are *divyang* (divine beings) now' (I_F_A_4). Changes in the linguistic discourse around disability, with religious undertones, became further amplified: 'But God has gifted everyone with some quality. They might be different from us. They too have divine (Hindi word: *divya*) powers in them which you don't have' (I_F_B_5).

Thus, data suggests that teachers' understanding of disabilities were predominantly shaped through deterministic and deficit perspectives. However, all of them were aware of changes in current terminology and increased efforts being made by the state. Some were mindful of the fact that with appropriate support these children can reach their potential but didn't link this with an undertaking of what this might look like within their classrooms.

The 'How' of Teaching Children with Disabilities

In interviews, the importance of flexibility, when teaching children with disabilities was a dominant theme, along with 'care and motivation'. The notion of care was not merely equated to sympathy but was also linked to attempts at supporting learning.

> It is important to make such a student sit in front. Talk to them more. Care for them more . . . push them to study more and read more according to what they want . . . . It is important to give her special attention. To make her read and learn and study properly. To make her concentrate. (I_F_A_4)

Motivating children with disabilities to work harder was mentioned frequently: 'We have to work at their level . . . making them understand is not a difficult task, but we have to keep motivating them' (I_F_B_4). In addition, nine teachers also emphasised the importance of care and motivation in combating the perceived negative impact of disability, arising from child's previous experiences, especially at home or in the community. While care, motivation and flexibility were mentioned during interviews, how these were practised becomes important to examine closely.

Teachers mentioned providing children with disabilities one-to-one *extra time* to assist with comprehension and task completion, often using repetition to support their understanding. 'I had to work harder for her than for the other children and give her time separately. If she did not understand anything, I would give her extra time' (I_F_A_3). Even though frequently mentioned during interviews, barring two examples, such practice was invisible during the observations. One of these examples of the teacher trying to assist the child individually is given below:

> The teacher goes to Akhil's *[pseudonym used for child with identified disability]* seat at the back of the class and asks him to show his notebook. Akhil gives his notebook to the teacher. The teacher looks at the notebook, returns to his desk with Akhil following him. The teacher goes back to explaining the lesson to the class, as Akhil stands beside his desk. The teacher then checks Akhil's work and tells him his mistakes. He explains the question and gives him more work to do. (O_K_B_5)

Teachers (16 of the 18) frequently mentioned *adapting the content and method of teaching* for children with disabilities, very little of which was noted during classroom observations.

> If he is unable to learn something, we take that into account. We don't see whether he is in fifth standard or fourth standard. We have to see what his difficulties are. So sometimes, we make syllabus from first class as well. (I_F_B_4)

> We try to teach them the basics, and how to speak clearly, interact with others, say Namaste, small and basic things can be taught to MR [intellectual disability] children, not more. (I_K_A_5)

> My teaching method is like – even if a differently abled child cannot write … some skills are just acquired by listening. He will observe, listen and learn something. (I_F_B_3)

The notion of 'something' mentioned in the quote above, was usually elaborated as teaching these children how to 'keep sitting, getting up, speaking, language, ways of living, that is more than enough for these kids' (I_J_B_5). While these adaptations were driven by good intentions, they tended to be framed in very simplistic ways, lacking clear learning goals, coupled with low expectations of children's learning potential.

Nine teachers cited encouraging other children to support those with disabilities, however there was little evidence of this during the observations. Changing a *child's seating arrangement* was another frequently mentioned strategy. Describing why this is useful, one of the teacher's reflected: 'if someone is unable to see properly, I try to make the child sit in front. If someone cannot hear properly, s/he is also made to sit in front.' (I_K_B_5). Teachers justified this, saying that moving children to the front of the class enabled them to see the blackboard, and hear the teacher more clearly, and prevented bullying.

However, during classroom observations it was common to see children with disabilities, irrespective of the severity of disability, sitting at the back or to one side in the classroom and were often ignored during classroom activities. Teachers were rarely seen to be making efforts to ensure that these children were following what was being taught.

> During the lesson both the two children with visual impairment were sitting side by side at the back of the class and start playing with a crushed ball of paper, teacher notices this but does not intervene. (O_J_B_3)

Teachers were also noted as frequently granting children with disabilities permission to leave the classroom to use the toilet or not saying anything when they walked in and out of the classroom during the lesson.

> The child with disability walked in and out of the class and the teacher seemed to ignore his movements. (O_F_B_5)

The wider focus of the observations in this study showed that exclusion from learning was arguably a common experience for many children, not just those with disabilities. On multiple occasions, teachers moved through a lesson without checking to see if the children were keeping up and did not necessarily offer help to children who were struggling to complete tasks. Teachers mainly focused their attention on a few good students and regularly called upon them to read texts aloud and answer questions. However, in the case of children with disabilities, this exclusion from participation and learning was further amplified. For example, in the case of Manav *[pseudonym used for child with identified disability]* during one of the lessons it was noted that 'throughout the lesson the teacher did not engage with him, that is, ask any questions. He remained off task during the lesson' (O_K_A_4).

Analysis also showed that some teachers felt that children with particular disabilities, such as multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and visual impairment, were best educated in special schools, or through the government's home-based support scheme. Echoing the sentiments of others, a teacher stated: 'Somebody with extreme levels of disability, like a completely blind child, should be educated in special schools … where teachers are trained to deal with such children' (I_K_A_3). Another teacher reflected:

> Special school have special teachers specially meant to teach them. Those teachers know how to behave with these children, or what these children need. The regular teachers are unable to estimate sometimes what the children need at specific times. That is the problem. (I_J_A_5)

While specialised provision was advocated by a few teachers, they all discussed how children with disabilities would benefit from support by Inclusive Education Resource Teachers or Special Educators:

> To teach them in school is not difficult but if they get a special teacher who has full knowledge, only they can teach with the best techniques. But here also there is nothing lacking. But it is best if a special teacher teaches, so that they can help in a correct manner (I_J_B_4)

> The special teachers have been taught how to guide these children specifically according to their requirements. The regular teacher might take six months to understand these needs while the special teacher may understand in six days. (I_F_A_3)

Alongside the importance of specialists, mainstream teachers highlighted the shortage of this support and consequently noted limitations in them providing meaningful support to the schools they were attached with.

> There are special teachers but not more than 2 or 3 and even they are not able to see all the children they have to visit. There are about 2 special teachers for a block with about 100 schools. I think there is more show and little happening on the ground. (I_K_A_4)

> The government has started inducting special needs teachers, although the number is still very low. Like they are only two teachers who cover all the schools in these areas. They aren't able to attend to every child, yet they try at their level. They also try to conduct seminars, meet parents and motivate us as well. (I_F_B_5)

Simultaneously teachers acknowledged their own lack of training, and the absence of on-going support to effectively include children with disabilities. Teachers struggled in these schools, as is evident in the following quotes:

> I have received no help or support. They hold camps at the block level.[2] How many children can even travel to these? There is nobody paying heed at the village for us. (I_F_B_5)

> The number of children is so high at the block level that they do not pay attention. Even material is not received properly. Things would be better if there were training or support centres near the villages and where materials like glasses are given to children closer to their homes. (I_K_A_4)

Teachers voiced strong feelings about their inability to teach children with disabilities, and highlighted the absence of professional expertise and training.

The interviews also revealed that most teachers lacked formal training, while a few had attended marginal training for between 1–3 days, provided annually (by the state) for one teacher from each school. Teachers were highly critical of the duration of the course, and the course content, which focused mainly on identification issues, and provided them with few skills with which to address the learning needs of children with disabilities.

> I have received training for 1 or 2 days during service – never more than 2 days. It was mainly about how to identify and categorise children with disability. They told us about symptoms of being disabled. There was a lot of information and also something on how to massage the child's limbs. Now such information is useful for the parents and not us. There was nothing that we had in the pre-service training either. (I_F_A_6)

One teacher explained that he had received no training, but that another teacher at his school who had been trained, had come back and shared his learnings. 'He told everyone that we need to take care for them and that camps will be organised for them. And we need to get them identified when camps are organised' (I_J_A_4). Accordingly, teachers seemed to allocate significant weight and time to disability certification and mentioned it frequently. However, it is noteworthy that the disability certificate provided no information to the teacher about the child's learning needs.

Discussion

Small Changes, but not Enough

Schooling as leading to a better future, has transformed the thinking of parents in relation to their child(ren) with disabilities, as seen among the families in rural Karnataka (Singal, 2016). In another study, young adults with disabilities who had attended school in rural Dewas, focused on social and personal gains, such as being respected in their community and increased self-confidence, when asked to reflect on the outcomes of schooling (Singal, Jeffery, Jain, & Sood, 2009). Similar views were now being expressed by teachers in rural government schools, as evident in the findings of this study. Teachers stressed the value of education for children with disabilities. They believed that being 'educated' (i.e.

attending formal schooling) led to a better life, social acceptance and self-reliance, and that being in school mattered.

While in line with previous studies (Jha, 2010; Singal, 2008), teachers' understanding of disability seemed to be primarily shaped through deterministic and deficit perspectives, they simultaneously expressed the need to actively respond to the child by being flexible, motivating and caring, moving away from a passive acceptance of the child's presence in class. They expressed readiness to engage with disability issues and had considerable awareness of state benefits. Teachers were also conscious of the use of appropriate terminology, though strongly embedded in a religious discourse. While there is little previous empirical evidence from rural schools for comparison, it is important to acknowledge the small shift that seems to have occurred in teachers' thinking, in contrast to previous anecdotal evidence of their attitudes towards children with disabilities.

There are, however, recent surveys from urban India that have similarly captured this positive shift in teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities (Shah et al., 2016; Srivastava, De Boer, & Pijl, 2015). A change is also visible in the findings of more recent qualitative studies based in urban schools (Taneja Johansson, 2015) where, in comparison to a decade ago, teachers were not strongly opposed to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools (Singal, 2008).

While acknowledging these small, yet important processes of change which are taking place, findings from this study raise concerns on teachers' continuing deficit perspectives and rather low learning expectations, especially in relation to children with certain types of disabilities. Of even greater concern are the contradictions between teachers' narrative and pedagogical practices observed in schools. Classroom observations revealed the limited engagement with, and neglect of, children with disabilities in general. This has seen little change over the last few years. Research in Delhi private schools concluded that teachers were making minor modifications to respond to the needs of children with disabilities, without undertaking any significant changes to their classroom practices (Jha, 2010). Similar observations were captured in Singal's (2016) study in government rural schools in Karnataka, and Taneja Johansson's (2015) research in private urban schools in West Bengal. Both studies noted that while there was no negativity towards children with disabilities, teachers made few largely insignificant efforts to accommodate them, all of which lacked any substantial engagement with learning.

Even in the findings of this study, teachers relied on a very a limited set of pedagogical strategies, such as giving children extra time, changing seats (in both cases, even though mentioned often, were infrequently observed), motivating children by giving work they could do, usually at a lower grade than the rest of the class. It is plausible that this stemmed from teachers' low expectations of children with disabilities; conversely, teachers frequently communicated their inability to teach these children, and their lack of professional training, thereby perpetuating the long-held view that certain types of children, can only be taught by certain types of teachers. Shah et al. (2016) also noted the lack of confidence to teach children with disabilities amongst mainstream teachers in the urban city of Ahmedabad. In a survey (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013) of 223 primary and 130 secondary school teachers in Delhi, participants rated themselves as having limited or low competence for working with students with disabilities. 70% of these teachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Lack of training to respond to the needs of children with disabilities has

been raised by teachers in studies spanning over a decade (Das & Kattumuri, 2011; Singal, 2008; Taneja Johansson, 2015).

Following 25 years of reform efforts in India, and the increasing number of children with disabilities entering schools (UNESCO, 2019), this absence of appropriate training is of concern. Given their seemingly positive perceptions on the value of education for children with disabilities, one has to question why teachers are still struggling in practice. We argue that this demands a deeper, more critical analysis of how education of children with disabilities has developed over time, and how these developments have shaped provisions at the classroom level. Singal (2019) argues that reforms for children with disabilities must be linked with larger educational development agendas, especially given the significant concerns about the overall poor quality of education in India.

Findings in this study highlight the conflict between teachers' belief in the value of education for children with disabilities but their continued narrow perceptions about children's abilities. Teachers also raised significant doubts about their own preparedness and competence, which calls to attention the need for teacher professional development and necessity of teacher support networks.

Teacher Professional Development

Historically, the need to increase school enrolments of all children, including those with disabilities, had dominated policies and programs in India. This focus on access cannot be overstated, given that in 2001/02, less than 2% of children with disabilities were reported to be in school. With figures now stated as 61%, the fact that one is more likely to find children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, compared to a few decades back, cannot be denied. What is more notable is that official programmes have not been cognisant in responding to these changes, with little attention being directed towards enabling teachers to meet the needs of a more diverse classroom, as vocalised by teachers in this study and also visible in their pedagogical practice. This claim is corroborated by the continuing high dropout levels, and low academic performance among children with disabilities who are in schools (UNESCO, 2019). Although teacher training has been identified as an area of focus in all policies since the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (MLJ, 1995), and in programmes such as the *Sarva Shikshya Abhiyan*, wherein a cascade model for in-service training was implemented (MHRD, 2011), concerns remain about the content and quality of delivery.

Although a decade old, the National Framework of Teacher Education's (National Council for Teacher Education [NCTE], 2009) observations on the reasons for the continued exclusion of children with disabilities remain relevant. NCTE noted:

> ... largely because of an inadequate preparation of teachers to address diversity in the classroom ... neither does the teacher understand their needs nor what s/he can do to make learning possible for them (p.12).

The findings show that teachers in this study, who had attended in-service training programmes, raised concerns about the short duration of the training; relevance and appropriateness of content; and the lack of sustainable impact on their practice.

The National Council for Teacher Education [NCTE] (2014) instituted a mandatory paper on inclusive education in the general teacher education programmes, compared to the

earlier provision of an optional paper on 'special needs'. However, based on a review of initial teacher training programmes across eight states in India, Bansal (2016) concluded that the teaching of inclusive education remains, 'heavily biased towards learning the theory of inclusive education without opportunities to practice and gain confidence with teaching methods needed to support diverse learners' (p. 83). None of the universities offered opportunities to integrate theory around inclusive education with skill building, through practicum. Similar insights about the lack of skill building through practicum were reached by Kumari, Nayan, Aggarwal, and Baswani (2019) in their analysis of Bachelor of Education programmes across 15 universities.

Teachers Need Support

While teacher training is crucial for enhancing learning for all children, including those with disabilities, support for teachers cannot be overlooked, more so given the realities of classrooms in rural schools. The Education Commission Report (2019, p. 12) highlights the vision of collective enterprise when it notes that:

> Teachers are at the heart of the learning process … (but) they cannot work alone. It takes a team of professionals to educate a child – teachers need leadership and support to be effective and to help learners with the greatest needs.

The report recognises that specialist 'inclusion teachers' have a critical role in facilitating inclusion in mainstream classrooms. They can support students with disabilities in classrooms by offering individual attention and also offer teachers practical advice on educational inclusion strategies.

In many ways, aspiring to the spirit of the above, the District Primary Education Program (District Primary Education Programme 2000) implemented the 'itinerant teacher' model, where the roles of Inclusive Education Resource Teachers and Home-Based Educators were introduced. This system continues under the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, as the state appoints Special Educators/Resource Teachers. While this classroom support is vital for teachers, as noted by teachers in our study, no systematic research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of these specialist support roles.

However, insights from our findings raise two main concerns in relation to this approach in rural India. Firstly, mainstream teachers though needed and expressed a role for Inclusive Education Resource Teachers (IERTs) were acutely aware of the shortage and limitations of such specialist support. This shortage has been noted also in the analysis of a previous national program for secondary education, the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan*. Analysing this programme, Singal, De, and Bhutani (2016) identified the government's own target of having one special educator for every five children with special needs at the block level, was far from being achieved. A survey conducted by Das et al. (2013) among government teachers in Delhi schools, showed that 87% of teachers lacked access to classroom support services. In government schools in Uttar Pradesh, Singh (2010) highlighted practical challenges relating to the role of IERTs. These included: high workload primarily due to significant shortage of trained personnel, resulting in some cases where one IERT was covering over 80 schools; large distance between schools and limited transport availability to navigate the journey; and the mismatch between

teachers' single disability training, and mixed disability students they were faced with in classrooms.

Secondly, instead of relying on the support teacher to help them develop their pedagogical skills, teachers in this study seemed to simply transfer the responsibility of teaching children with disabilities onto the support teacher. This meant that children with disabilities, though enrolled in schools remained at the margins of teaching and learning processes. Thus, we argue that providing some support for mainstream teachers, especially for those working in rural schools, is vital, but understanding how these different roles function collaboratively is equally significant.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the perspectives and practices of mainstream rural teachers, at a time of significant efforts towards inclusive education, in the Indian primary school system. While it is not possible to apply findings from rural Haryana to other parts of India, the study raises important points for consideration. Firstly, teachers in rural schools are becoming more accepting of the presence of children with disabilities and are able to articulate stronger reasons for their participation in schooling. However, teachers continue to view children with disabilities through a deficit lens, negatively impacting on the learning opportunities being made available to them. Secondly, teachers were significantly constrained in their pedagogical repertoire and lacked simple strategies to include children with disabilities in classroom activities, perpetuating their exclusion from within these settings. Finally, other significant issues which emerged were the lack of teacher confidence due to appropriate professional development opportunities, and a clear absence of on-going support for teachers in rural schools.

It is only by listening, observation, and clear action to resolve these challenges that we can move forward in truly achieving the inclusion of all learners, particularly those with disabilities.

Notes

1. Identification key: I = interview; O = observation; Jind (J)Fatehabad, (F), Kaithal (K) = districts; A or B = the school in the specific district; and 3, 4, 5 = the class.
2. A block is a district sub-division for planning and administrative purposes.

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