

Inclusive Education Through Open & Distance Learning

Dr. Neha Mishra

Assistant Professor, Education Department, Rajkiya Mahila Mahavidhyalaya, Bangar Kannauj, U.P., India
Email: [nehafromkanpur\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:nehafromkanpur[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *Children with disabilities are presented as a priority target group, one that is subject to severe discrimination, segregation and exclusion from all social aspects of life. Most of the initial action and advocacy for the right to education of these groups of children has traditionally been taken by government & no government agencies. Lack of information, resources, and combine with discriminatory attitudes towards persons with disability at all levels of society, contributes to the continued neglect or ignored of their right to education. Irrespective of the barrier faced, and the slow progress made in achieving access education, it is important that it is increasingly clear understood by governments, schools, and the wide community, those children with disabilities, together with children, have a basic right to education. It is the responsibility of the government of the respective country to fulfill this right for all children, including children with disabilities. Adequate accessible and appropriate support services should be provided to meet the needs of persons with different disabilities in mainstream schools. Today, educators around the globe are coming up with new ways of thinking about disability an educational research, policy, and practice. The advancement in ICT with Open and Distance education could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of children and/or people with disabilities, flexibly so that the learning process can go on. These groups may be able to access study materials at home, which are seen as the safest, least expensive as well as least restrictive environment. In line with these and other considerations, the present paper tries to discuss issues and strategies needed with regard to education of children and/or people with disabilities through ODL systems. The purpose of this paper is to provide clear strategy options for programming in the area of inclusive education, while keeping in mind the need for system-wide approaches designed to address the needs of ALL children. Once the support infrastructure is in place, distance learning offers a viable flexible alternative for educating students with disability. It is recommended that the open and distance universities pay attention to the admission policy, infrastructure, and training of lecturers from the different departments so as to be responsive to the needs of students with disabilities.*

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Open & Distance Learning, ICT, Children with Disability, NEP 2020

1. Introduction

Education is a powerful instrument for overcoming inequalities, promoting human development, accelerating social transformation and achieving economic progress. Ensuring equitable distribution of social and educational facilities and opportunities is the cornerstone of strategies to overcome educational deprivation. In an inclusive society, members not only have the right to education or the right to political participation but actually take part in the process, using the right to education and having a vote that actually counts in a political process. An inclusive society is a society that over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures inclusion, equality of opportunity as well as capability of all members of the society to determine an agreed set of social institutions that govern social interaction.

Although the concept of inclusive education has been promoted and discussed nationally and internationally for more than a decade, multiple barriers and challenges remain to the full participation of person with disabilities in education. Lack of information, resources, combined with discriminatory attitudes towards persons with disabilities at all levels of society, contributes to the continued neglect and ignored of their right to education. This partly explains the minimum rate of progress that has been made towards the enrolment and participation in the education process of person with disabilities. The factors are complex and extend beyond the boundaries of the school and classroom. Children with disabilities form a significant proportion of

the out-of-school population. They are presented here as a priority target group, one that is subject to severe discrimination, segregation, and exclusion from all social aspects of life. The purpose of this paper is to provide clear strategy options for programming in the area of inclusive education, while keeping in mind the need for system-wide approaches designed to address the needs of ALL children. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was entered into force in 2008, was ratified by India in October, 2008. Article 24 of the Convention is on education and includes the following: State Parties shall ensure that:

- 1) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
- 2) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- 3) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
- 4) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- 5) Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion. The advancement in ICT with Open and Distance education could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of children and/or people

Volume 15 Issue 3, March 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

with disabilities, flexibly so that the learning process can go on. These groups may be able to access study materials at home, which are seen as the safest, least expensive as well as least restrictive environment. In line with these and other considerations, the present paper tries to discuss issues and strategies needed with regard to education of children and/or people with disabilities through ODL systems. Once the support infrastructure is in place, distance learning offers a viable flexible alternative for educating students with disability.

2. Special Learning Needs

Students with special learning needs are those students who for various reasons are not developing to their full educational potential or are at risk of not achieving the major achievement objectives of Curriculum. This refers to those students who are at risk of underachieving including those with specific learning and behavioral difficulties as well as those gifted and talented students who may not be realizing their full potential. Students with "Special Learning Needs" also include those that have been previously referred to as students with "Special Needs" that include the following:

- Students with sensorial impairment- (auditory or visual disabilities)
- Students with developmental delay (PDD- pervasive developmental delay; GDD - Global Developmental Delay)
- Students with Intellectual impairment (ranging from Cognitive delay to Gifted and talented Students)
- Students with Physical impairment (where mobility or functions requiring motor movements are affected)
- Students with Behavioral differences (differences in social, emotional or spiritual domain of development due to various environmental external or internal factors such as childhood trauma or victims of bullying, Attention Deficient Disorder (ADD) / Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), child abuse victims etc.
- Students with Communication difficulty (e.g. delayed speech, difficulties in language acquisition or other communication disabilities, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Asperger' syndrome)
- Students with Specific Learning Disabilities(SLD) such as the difficulty in reading due to Dyslexia or difficulty in expressing thoughts in writing and graphing due to Dysgraphia or other conditions that affect learning
- Students with Multiple disabilities (combination of one or more of the impairments e.g. a child with visual and hearing impairment is unable to see and hear)
- Students at risk because they are functioning well below their peers academically either in literacy or numeracy or across subject areas. There may be some students who are "at risk" also because of the geographical location of their schools [example children from Northern Group Schools] or due to other risk factors' either within or out of the school community.

Open and distance learning system has established its credibility in the field of education and now is expanding and diversifying its domains in the 21st century to meet the educational challenges. Owing to its extensive reach, open learning system's use of information technology and cost

effectiveness can play a vital role in meeting the expectations of disadvantaged groups and children and/or people with special learning needs. In many countries special units of program within the existing colleges and universities provides distance education. Distance education has been catching up very fast in all countries developed and developing, socialist and capitalist, western and eastern.

3. Some of important policies and programs are:

- The Integrated Education for Disabled Children Scheme, launched in 1974, to admit children with disabilities in regular schools;
- The District Primary Education Program, 1985 which acknowledges the fact that universalization of education is possible only if it includes children with disabilities;
- The National Policy on Education, 1986, which promotes the integration of children with mild disabilities into the mainstream;
- The Project Integrated Education for the Disabled, launched in 1987, which encourages all schools in a neighborhood to enroll children with disabilities;
- The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, which recommends making changes in assessment and curriculum, and removing architectural barriers, to support inclusion. It also recommends providing free books and uniform for children with disabilities;
- The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Retardation and Multiple Disability, Act 1999, which recommends promotion of inclusive education;
- The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2000), which pledges that the "SSA will ensure that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided education in an appropriate environment";
- The Amendment to the Constitution in 2001, to make education a fundamental right for those in the 6-14 age group, which covers children with disabilities;
- The draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, which has a section on education, states that, "There is a the general education system through inclusive education." need for mainstreaming of the persons with disabilities in It also mentions that children "learn best in the company of their peers"; A Comprehensive Plan of Action for Children and Youth with Disabilities, presented by the minister for Human Resource Development, Arjun Singh, in March 2005. This Action Plan advocates inclusive education, and envisages making all schools "disabled-friendly" by 2020.
- The RCI is also working with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to develop audio and video materials for "sensitization of parents and grassroots functionaries and making them aware of the productive capacity of children with disabilities.

4. The Promises of Distance Learning

The convenience of time and space is a big promise made by distance learning. Students do not have to physically be with the instructor in space and, depending on the method used,

they do not have to be together in time as well. This is a great advantage for non-traditional students who cannot attend at regular times. Many of the promises of distance learning are financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time or distance. The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same. In many countries special units of program within the existing colleges and universities provides distance education. Distance education has been catching up very fast in all countries developed and developing, socialist and capitalist, western and eastern. Developing countries are turning to state run distance education programs to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space. Places such as Beijing, Jakarta, and South American countries such as Brazil and Argentina have all begun to use distance-learning techniques to reach those that would by any other means be unreachable. Countries like China are moving from elite to mass education, and that traditional universities cannot meet the demand. China uses a radio and television delivery system to serve 1.5 million students, two-thirds of which are in a degree program. Open University uses compressed video conferencing to reach remote students and to enhance classes in Studies by connecting with students. Of course there is also wide use in the United States, both in the public and private sectors. Distance learning can meet the promise to deliver classes to a geographically broad and diverse population. Not only that, but the need seems to be strong for such programs. Many Universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on customer needs, and respond to the competitive pressures. Distance learning technologies have the potential to assist in solving these problems. Distance learning seems to address all of issues of higher education. Administrators hope that distance learning methods will help make higher education more cost-effective.

5. Key Aspects of NEP 2020 for Inclusive Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 champions inclusive education as a core pillar, aiming for equitable access and participation for all learners, especially marginalized sectors like girls, minorities, and children with disabilities, by removing barriers, fostering diversity, integrating technology, and prioritizing teacher training for holistic development, though implementation challenges like infrastructure gaps and teacher readiness remain significant hurdles.

- Identifies and targets groups such as SC/ST, OBC, minorities, girls, transgender individuals, migrant communities, and those with disabilities for focused support.
- Aims to eliminate physical, social, and systemic barriers to learning, promoting a sense of belonging for all.
- Emphasizes recognizing each student's unique capabilities and fostering their overall growth (academic and non-academic).
- Uses digital tools to democratize access and support diverse learners, including those with disabilities.

- Calls for specialized training (e.g., four-year B.Ed. for special educators) to equip teachers for inclusive classrooms.
- Promotes flexible, child-centered methods, multilingual education, and culturally relevant content.

6. Strategies to be put in Place to Effectively Embrace PWDs in ODL

- A weakness of mainstreaming disability is that practitioners often easily assume that people's beliefs can be changed within due time. Also, people might change their views, but not their practices. Its effect is often overestimated.
- Open and Distance Learning courses, resources, and materials must be designed and delivered in such a way that the level of communication and course-taking experience is the same for students with or without disabilities.
- Adding computers, assistive technology and other adapted learning equipment, in addition to scholarships to students is assumed to have resulted in an increasing number of students with disabilities entering higher education. Assistive devices should be readily available and materials in the form needed should be availed in time.
- The university must pay attention to the admission policy, infrastructure, and training of lecturers from the different departments and be responsive to the needs of students with disabilities. There should be an explicit affirmative enrolment policy to waive the entry qualification for people with disabilities. There should be a clear-cut policy on financial assistance for students with disabilities.
- Lecturers should be trained so that they are articulate with basics needed to assist students with disabilities.
- The infrastructure in the region should be friendly to students with physical disabilities as there are no ramps.
- OU should create a disability resource center which is housed in the student support services to work with other organizations to develop, adapt or create study materials for PWDs.
- There is need to create a Disability policy which stipulates structures and resources for PWDs.
- Environmental barriers are in essence problems that could be mediated by careful, inclusive and participatory planning. One big reason for mainstreaming the needs of people with a disability in all development planning and implementation is that if you plan ahead, you will not have to patch up afterwards, which can be costly and time-consuming.
- Adequate funding is important if appropriate study materials are to be provided and barrier free environments developed. Lastly, the inclusion of PWDs needs to be properly managed it cannot be left to chance alone.
- While designing the curriculum, we should take care of the special needs and should think about various assistive measures which can help them to pursue the courses and programs smoothly.
- Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students, the same opportunities as their peers in order to demonstrate the

achievement of learning outcomes. Institutions should consider implementing procedures for supporting alternative assessment and examination arrangements when and wherever necessary.

- Availability of Program and Course related specifications, descriptions and other facilities for the disabled learners through manuals or student's handbooks should be assured. This will aid in reducing the impediments caused due to various impairments. The early provision of information will also enable students to choose a course more suited to their situation if the difficulties cannot be overcome.
- Research should be commissioned to ascertain how existing ODL resources and infrastructures, e.g. from Open Schools, could be used in advance planning for conflict and emergency situations.

7. Conclusion

The important thing is to let the disabled learners feel that they are welcomed. Providing education to the unreached including people with various disabilities is one of the prime goals of all conventional, correspondence and distance education institutions. Open and distance learning system has established its credibility in the field of education and now is expanding and diversifying its domains in the 21st century to meet the educational challenges. Owing to its extensive reach, open learning system's use of information technology and cost effectiveness can play a vital role in meeting the expectations of disadvantaged groups and children and/or people with special learning needs. With a partial modification in the existing system this can be made disabled friendly. By the use of multiple media and technology (Daisy format, E-text with video and audio clippings, use of Edusat, interactive radio counseling) a quality higher education can be ensured to these sections who largely depend on such techniques. From the very beginning, the requirements of the learners for completing the program should be addressed in all respects. In case of the disabled it is more challenging. The people having experience in working with disabled, people having good knowledge and information about such students and disabled members of the concerned institutions should be included in all committees. The views of the members of different committees should be taken seriously and necessary modifications/changes as per requirement should be made. Attitudes of whole Indian society need to be changed positively but that of ministers, policy-planners, administrative officers, teachers, coordinators and resource-developers need to be changed on a priority. Proper sensitization of masses with respect to nature, needs, and potential of PWDs is immediately desired.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to my husband, parents and my professors for their valuable recommendations during all stages of analysis of my research work. Their patience and granted access to the technical equipment have helped me to use the latest technology innovation. I would also like to thank the following organization for schedule in my meeting with the participants and other relevant persons to observe the entire work.

References

- [1] Creating an Inclusive Society: Practical Strategies to Promote Social Integration, DESA 2009, Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs/2009/Ghana/inclusive-society.pdf>
- [2] Kaputa, T.M. (2013). Making Open and Distance Learning Inclusive: The Zimbabwe Open University's Experience with People with Disabilities, Greener Journal of Educational Research ISSN: 2276-7789 Vol. 2 (3), pp. 392-401.
- [3] Mapuranga, B. & Nyenya, T. (2014). Open and Distance Learning Accessibility to Learners with Disabilities, International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE) Retrieved from <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijhsse/v1-i4/1.pdf>
- [4] Ramakrishna, T. & Nembakkim, R. (2010). Inclusive curriculum development opportunities and challenges in open & distance education, Retrieved from http://wikieducator.org/images/2/25/Tata_Ramakrishna.pdf
- [5] Singh, Y. & Agrawal, A. (2013). Role of Open and Distance Learning Systems in Education and Rehabilitation of Children with Special Needs. Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 962-970. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258553750_Role_of_Open_and_Distance_Learning_Systems_in_Education_and_Rehabilitation_of_Children_with_Special_Needs
- [6] The Right of Children with Disabilities to Education: A Rights-Based Approach to Inclusive Education. Geneva: UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEECIS). Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Background_NoteFINAL\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Background_NoteFINAL(1).pdf)
- [7] Towards Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: A Guideline. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2009. 154 p Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/disabchild09-en.pdf>
- [8] Valentine, D. (2002). Distance Learning: Promises, Problems, and Possibilities, Volume 1, Issue 4, April 2014, pp. 1-12. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.496.2781&rep=rep1&type=pdf>