

The Role of Teachers in supporting Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Special Schools: A Theoretical Review

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Abstract:

At special schools for children with intellectual disabilities (ID), the role of the teacher is crucial in supporting their academic, social, emotional, behavioural and functional development. Because these children have a wide range of educational needs that are often complex, teachers are expected to perform a number of tasks beyond those that occur in the classroom, including, individual education planning, behaviour management, life skills training, family engagement and collaboration with professionals from various disciplines. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, are recent policy announcements that highlight the importance of skilled special teachers to ensure equitable education of children with disabilities and ensure their access to excellent education. The purpose of the study is to investigate the dynamics of teachers' roles in supporting children with intellectual disability in special schools and to identify the competency and pedagogical skills required to be successful in special schools. The study takes a theoretical approach, critically reviewing existing research, theory and national and international policies relevant to special education and intellectual disabilities. The review highlights the role of the teacher as a teacher, facilitator, counsellor, behaviour manager, as a collaborator of lifelong learning. It highlights the importance of contemporary professional learning, effective pedagogy, adequate school support and strong family-school partnerships to improve educational outcomes and the well-being of children with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, competences of teachers, professional learning in special schools.

1. Introduction:

Education is a basic human right and it is a key tool in promoting equality of opportunity, inclusion and child disability development. Children with ID have many limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviours related to learning, communication, social interaction and independence with others (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2021). Owing to their diverse education needs, these youth require customised teaching, teaching methods and support to realize their potential. Though inclusive education has made some strides in India, special schools still play a vital role in providing holistic education and therapeutic intervention to children with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities.

Special school teachers are key players in the educational care and intervention with children with intellectual disabilities. They are responsible for more than just academic support and are responsible for

developing individual education plans, behaviour management, communication support, life skills support, assessment, parent counselling, and coordinating with other multidisciplinary professionals. Teachers' role has changed considerably as there is a shift from a medical model of disability to a rights-based and inclusive model. While teaching in special schools, teachers continuously face challenges such as lack of resources, lack of competent personnel, limited opportunities for professional development, and high diversity in the classes. Such problems often make it difficult to implement effective individualized instruction and evidence-based practices. Understanding the complex role of teachers is therefore important to improve the quality of education and promote children's holistic development with intellectual disability.

In the present context the current theoretical analysis deals with the roles of teachers as assisting children with intellectual disabilities in special schools in India. It synthesizes knowledge from previous literature, theories, and policy documents to highlight three roles that teachers play: Instructional, Developmental, and Collaborative roles, as well as Advocacy role.

1.2 Concept of Intellectual Disability:

Intellectual Disability (ID) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by significant intellectual disability and adaptive functioning deficits that occur during the developmental period, typically before the age of 22 years (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2021).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), intellectual disability is a disorder characterized by a significant intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits that interfere with an individual's ability to meet developmental and sociocultural expectations for independence and social responsibility. Restrictions in adaptive functioning scores are a major determinant of the severity of intellectual disability, moving to a focus on the deficit rather than primarily upon intelligence quotient (IQ) scores. Educationally, children with intellectual disabilities have a range of learning needs including reduced cognitive processing speed, difficulties with communication, memory, problem-solving, socialization and self-care.

This therefore requires individualised education plans, adapted teaching methods, structured learning environments and support throughout their education in order to maximise their learning achievements and functional independence whilst ensuring they are socially engaged. In special schools, teachers are central in meeting the wide spectrum of needs by implementing evidence-based teaching practice, increasing adaptive skills and supporting holistic development of learners.

2. Theoretical Perspectives:

Theories about learning, development and disability are of value to understanding the role of teachers in a special school for children with intellectual disabilities (ID). These theories provide the foundation for developing effective teaching methods, for full development, and for meaningful participation of children with intellectual disabilities in educational settings.

The Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky is a very popular explanation that learning occurs through social interaction and collaborative participation. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that children can learn higher order skills with the help of someone who knows more or is more knowledgeable, whether that be an adult or another child. In the context of a special educational institution, teachers act as facilitators and provide scaffolding, adjust the curriculum, and gradually reduce their scaffolded support

to allow students to become more proficient. It is particularly relevant to children with intellectual disabilities who often require structured assistance to gain academic, communicative and adaptive skills. Another major paradigm is Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory which explains that children's cognitive abilities develop sequentially and through their interactions with their environment. Although children with ID progress at a slower rate, Piaget's theory highlights the importance of providing educationally appropriate programming and learning experiences. Special schools' teachers use real props, experiential learning, repetition and hands-on approaches to enhance cognitive understanding and experiential learning.

The Social Model of Disability is a rights-based model which argues that disability is not solely due to the limitations of the individual but instead is due to environmental and social barriers. The focus of this approach is on creating accessible, supportive and inclusive learning spaces, not on fixing the child. The teachers have a big role in reducing these barriers by adapting teaching methods, ensuring equal access, promoting positive attitudes and supporting the academic rights of students with intellectual disability.

Another relevant paradigm that will come with relevance in this regard is that of the Person centered Approach which focuses on recognising each learner's strengths and preferences, abilities and specific needs, rather than only focusing on weaknesses. This approach enables individual educational planning and encourages teachers to create personalised learning goals which will support autonomy, self-determination and quality of life.

All of these perspectives highlight the role of the teacher as an instructional facilitator, partner, advocate, and mentor for children with intellectual impairments who are being nurtured to become whole children. They lay the foundation for the theory of evidence-based pedagogical methods and highlight the importance of a personalized, learner-centred and rights-based education in special schools.

3. Discussions:

3.1 Evolving Role of Teachers in Special Schools:

The role of teachers in special schools has evolved significantly from teacher to a wide range of specialists that encourage and empower the holistic development of intellectual disabled children. Traditionally, special educators focused mainly on academic teaching and the management of disability related limitations. Current approaches to education focus on a rights-based, inclusive and learner-centred education that requires teachers to be mindful of the academic, social, emotional, behavioural and functional needs of all children.

The role of the teacher in special schools is to develop and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) designed to meet the unique skills, needs and learning rate of each child. Teachers also foster the development of communication, daily living, social interaction, vocational readiness and self-care skills, helping children with intellectual disabilities to participate more fully in school, home and community. It is noteworthy that the role of the teacher has expanded to include behaviour.

management and SEL support. Teachers create supportive and structured learning environments, implement positive behaviour support strategies and develop self-confidence, motivation and emotional wellbeing for learners.

The role of teachers has been enhanced as a result of various legislations and regulations, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and the National Education regulatory (NEP) 2020, in India. The special educator is expected to become a champion of inclusive ideals, advocate for the rights of children with disabilities, encourage the involvement of families, and continuously learn new strategies

and develop his/her skills through reflective practice and training. To the role of the teachers in special schools from mere transmitters of knowledge to teachers, facilitators, counsellors, collaborators and advocates, who play a vital role in enhancing the learning potential, independence and quality of life of children with intellectual disabilities.

Students learn to engage in instructional and pedagogical practices.

The use of efficient instructional and pedagogical methods is important to address the diverse learning needs of intellectually disabled children in special education institutions. The teacher needs to be able to develop individualized, student-centred and evidence-informed teaching strategies that will improve academic achievement, independence and interaction with others because of the variability of children's cognitive abilities, adaptive behaviour and communication skills.

One of the core teaching strategies is the development of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), which enable teachers to tailor learning goals, adjust the curriculum and measure student progress. Teachers use differentiated instruction methods by adjusting teaching approaches, learning materials, and classroom activities, according to students' capabilities and learning speeds. Special educators, as well as academic instruction, focus on developing functional academics, communication skills, self-care skills, social skills, and vocational skills to prepare students for greater independence in their lives. The use of assistive technology and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) can greatly enhance the learning opportunities and classroom participation of children who have communication difficulties.

Teachers also create structured, caring and challenging learning environments using positive behaviour support strategies and encouraging active participation. Parental involvement and consultation with experts ensure the continuity of interventions and school curriculum, resulting in better children's development.

The NEP 2020 encourages learner-centred pedagogy, flexibility in curriculum, and competency-based education, for students with disabilities in the Indian context. As a result of this, it is expected that teachers in special schools will use innovative and evidence-based teaching techniques that will enhance learning, independence and the all-round development of children with intellectual disabilities.

School-based special education is only possible if children are educated in the context of behaviour management and SE supports. Many children with intellectual disabilities experience difficulties with communication, emotional regulation, social interaction and adaptive functioning, which may affect their learning and participation in school. Teachers are therefore key in creating a controlled, safe, and supportive learning environment that promotes good behaviour and mental health.

Special teachers use evidence-based practices such as positive reinforcement, modelling, prompting, a structured classroom routine and positive behaviour support to encourage appropriate behaviour and reduce inappropriate behaviour. Functional behaviour assessment helps teachers to identify the cause of behaviour and provides a range of intervention strategies that are specific to children's needs.

Teachers foster social and emotional development in students, through developing communication skills, self-confidence, emotional regulation, peer engagement and social skills, aside from behaviour management. Teachers support positive relationships and self-esteem, as well as active involvement in school and community life, through counselling, cooperative learning and social skills training. Behavioural and emotional therapies are more effective when used in conjunction with parents, psychologists and other professionals.

Teachers play a crucial role in promoting an inclusive and supportive school environment in India, a country where children with intellectual disabilities often face societal stigma and limited access to support

services. Teachers who combine behavior management and SEL achieve a significant contribution to the holistic development, autonomy and quality of life of children with intellectual disabilities.

3.3 Professional Competencies and Continuous Professional Development:

Teachers working with children with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the special education environment must have a set of professional competences that enable them to perform effectively. Special teachers require a broad background in intellectual disabilities, child development, assessment procedures, curriculum.

Individualised education plans (IEPs), evidence-based teaching strategies, assistive technology, behavioural management and modification.

Continuous professional development (CPD) plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' knowledge and teaching skills as well as their professional capability. Frequent participation in workshops, in-service training, seminars, action research and professional learning communities provide teachers with an opportunity to keep up with new educational strategies, technology and legislation. They help teachers increase their capabilities to use innovative pedagogical approaches, manage classes with diverse students and improve the performance of their students (UNESCO, 2020).

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) establishes professional standards for special teachers in India and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has emphasized lifelong professional learning and ongoing teacher development.

4. Problems faced by Special School Teachers:

Special school teachers are key players in supporting children with intellectual disabilities, but have many professional and institutional barriers that could influence the quality of the educational services they provide. One major issue is the need to fit the diverse cognitive, behavioural, communicative and adaptive needs of children into a single classroom.

Special teachers face challenges due to limited availability of teaching-learning materials, access to assistive technologies, poor infrastructure and lack of skilled workers particularly in low-resource settings. In addition, the management of challenging behaviour, the level of contact that teachers have with families and working closely with other professionals from other disciplines often increases their work and professional commitments.

One concern is the limited availability of continuing professional development opportunities, which could limit teachers' ability to use evidence-based teaching strategies and apply new technologies to education. Confronting these difficulties necessitates enhanced institutional support, ongoing professional development, sufficient teaching resources, and cooperative relationships among educational institutions, families, and policymakers. Improvements in these areas will enable teachers to provide children with intellectual disabilities more focussed educational and developmental support.

5. Policy and Practice Implications:

The theoretical analysis highlights the importance of strengthening policies and practices in education to enhance the quality of teaching and learning of or for children.

In special schools with intellectual disabled children. The implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 requires more to be done in terms of teacher training, material and institutional support to make educational materials and content

accessible. Policymakers need to ensure adequate recruitment of qualified special teachers, teacher/student ratios, and access to assistive technology and inclusive educational environments.

Teachers need to use evidence-based practice, develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), encourage positive behaviour supports and integrate real life skills into classroom procedures. To ensure that the approach to education and development is coherent, a close working relationship with parents, therapists and other multidisciplinary providers is essential. Furthermore, strengthening teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and technical skills by promoting in-service training, workshops, seminar and capacity building programmes is critical to ensure that teachers are equipped with current pedagogical content knowledge and technical skills. Improving the implementation of policies and promoting high quality classroom practices would raise educational outcomes, foster greater independence and better the lives of children with intellectual disabilities. These steps will also help to achieve equitable, inclusive and high-quality special education in India.

6. Conclusion:

Specialized Educational Institutions (SEIs) play a crucial role in the holistic development of children with intellectual disabilities under the guidance of teachers. Their roles are not limited to classroom teaching but have grown to encompass personalized educational planning, evidence-based teaching strategies, behaviour management, social-emotional support, working with families and other professionals, and advocating for children with disabilities' rights and inclusion. For these multiple tasks the teachers must exhibit strong professional abilities, including understanding of intellectual disabilities, adaptations to instruction, assessment, communication and classroom management. The review highlights the importance of learner-centred and evidence-based approaches to education, regular assessment, and tailored support that addresses the needs of each child in a special educational setting. At the same time, issues of limited capacity, resources, professional development and institutional capacity constraints emphasize the need for continued policy support and capacity building.

In the Indian context, enhancing teacher education, ongoing professional development, and the successful execution of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, together with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, are crucial for elevating the quality of special education. This review suggests that proficient and well-supported teachers are essential for improving the educational experiences, functional autonomy, and overall welfare of children with intellectual disabilities. Future research ought to concentrate on generating context-specific evidence to enhance teacher training and professional practices in special education institutions.

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