Role of Open and Distance Learning Systems in Education and Rehabilitation of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

*Achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals will be impossible without improving access to and quality of education for children with disabilities. It is a binding on Indian government as well, being a signatory to UNCRPD. MHRD (2006) in its SSA framework clearly states that "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. SSA will adopt **zero rejection policy** so that no child is left out of the education system. It will also support a wide range of approaches, options and strategies for education of children with special needs"*

The advent of technology and open and distance learning 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 materials from home, which is 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 and rehabilitation of CWSN through ODL systems. Once the support infrastructure is in place, distance learning offers a viable flexible alternative for teaching students with disabilities

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Introduction

'Education is a fundamental human right.' (UNESCO 2000) United Nation's Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) in their review of situation regarding realization of its second goal - GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION (Ensure that, by 2015, children

everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling) – finds that:

- Hope dims for universal education by 2015, even as many poor countries make tremendous strides
- Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are home to the vast majority of children out of school
- Inequality thwarts progress towards universal education

According to UNICEF ROSA (2003), the obstacles to a good education faced by millions of children in South Asia are daunting enough. For the 10% of the region's young people who are estimated to have some kind of disability, the barriers are compounded. The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia looked at examples in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka of how such children were given schooling, and whether this is the type of education they have the right to expect. The result was a very mixed bag indeed. Overall, it is clear that large numbers of children who struggle daily with additional hardships are not getting the chance to improve their lives through education. This means, of course, they are caught in a spiral of low expectation, low esteem and low income. The minority of children with disability that do get places are often not sitting in the same classroom as other boys and girls because of a sense that they need to be separated and treated differently. Globally it is estimated that 70% of children with disabilities, including those with mild mental retardation, can attend regular schools provided the environment is designed to be accessible and the institution is willing to accommodate them.

UNICEF's Report on the Status of Disability in India 2000 states that there are around 30 million children in India suffering from some form of disability. The Sixth All-India Educational Survey (NCERT, 1998) reports that, out of India's 200 million school-aged children (6–14 years), 20 million require special needs education. While the national average for gross enrolment in school is over 90 per cent, less than five per cent of children with disabilities are in schools.

According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010: reaching the marginalized, children with disabilities remain one of the main groups being widely excluded from quality education. Disability is recognised as one of the least visible yet most potent factors in educational marginalisation. 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:

I.   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;

II. 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;

III. Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;

IV. Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;

V.   Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

It can be safely assumed that achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals will be impossible without improving access to and quality of education for children with disabilities. It is a binding on Indian government as well, being a signatory to UNCRPD.

Education & Rehabilitation of Children with Special Needs (CWSN)

Physical, sensory, developmental or mental disability often becomes a barrier to education and rehabilitation of CWSN challenging their inclusion. Difficulties in accessing public transport and public buildings have a substantial effect on the ability of the disabled people to participate in educational, socio-cultural, economic, and sport activities. Apart from their disability, the attitudes of others towards them, their own and their families' outlook play an important role in their perception of selves. All this leads to social exclusion of the persons with disabilities and sometimes-social exclusion of other members of their family as well.

In India, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) joined hands with UNICEF and launched Project Integrated Education for Disabled Children (PIED) in the year 1987, to strengthen the integration of learners with disabilities into regular schools. In 1997, IEDC was amalgamated with other major basic education projects like the DPEP (Chadha, 2002) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Department of Elementary Education, 2000). The Persons with Disability Act, 1995 has a provision of providing education to children with special needs in the most appropriate environment. The SSA launched by the Govt. of India, in 2001, underlines the prerogative of a child with disability to be included in the mainstream of education. Further, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 allows all children to be in inclusive system.

MHRD (2006) in its SSA framework clearly states that "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. SSA will adopt **zero rejection policy** so that no child is left out of the education system. It will also support a wide range of approaches, options and strategies for education of children with special needs"

Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) was approved in September, 2008 to replace IEDC Scheme from 2009-10. The Scheme is 100% centrally funded. This scheme is proposed to be subsumed under the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) under the 12th Plan. The features to be continued are as follows:

- It covers children studying at Secondary Stage (Class IX to XII)
- It covers disabled children having blindness, low vision, leprosy cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disabilities, mental retardation, mental illness, autism and cerebral palsy.
- An amount of Rs.3000/- per child per annum earmarked for activities such as identification and assessment, assistive devices, allowance for transport, escorts, reader, uniforms, books and stationary, stipend for girls, etc. Besides, there is provision for engagement of special teachers, creation of barrier free environment, teacher training etc. There is emphasis on community orientation.
- Convergence with other programmes is emphasized.
- Rs.200/- per girl child per month is to be provided as stipend.
- In addition to Central assistance, State Governments are expected to provide Rs.600 per child per annum as scholarship. The demand for transport component under RMSA in general, should be considered specifically for beneficiaries under this category.

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) is mainly responsible for education and rehabilitation of CWSN. It is doing a lot in the field. The RCI in collaboration with Media Lab Asia has developed a comprehensive national web portal on disability, named, www.punarbhava.in. It serves as a gateway to all related information regarding different disability issues. However, the situation remains grim as far as education and rehabilitation of CWSN in our country is concerned. Current global trend in this field is that of 'inclusion'. It requires education of CWSN in regular schools, in their own community, and by regular teachers. Inclusive education appreciates every learner's fundamental right to learn and acknowledges that each child has unique abilities and needs. However, the inclusive debate, philosophical and practical, must be moved forward in ways that enable schools and education systems to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their approaches to inclusion (NCSE, 2010).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Systems

The open and distance learning system had started in India and worldwide to relieve the pressure on institutions of learning following the traditional system of education. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2004), most ODL systems have a **philosophy** that aims to:

- Remove barriers to education
- Allow students to study what they want, when they want, where they want.

There have been many attempts to define both open and distance learning. A recent discussion of these terms described them as 'approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.' (Moore and Tait, 2002, p.7)

UNICEF ROSA (2009) states that "The term **ODL** or **open and distance learning** is frequently used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches that reach learners in places that are convenient or accessible to them, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending school or college in person, or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study."

Open and distance learning systems provide flexible time, location and are self paced thus fitting into irregular schedules which is suitable for children and young people with disabilities. Technology-mediated distance learning via computer networks increases learning opportunities because it bypasses the physical difficulties some students may have in navigating around campus and the extra equipment that may need to be separately housed on campus. 'It is more than ever clear that open and distance learning will be an important element of future education and training systems.' (Moore and Tait, 2002, p.10). Further, 'There is now widespread recognition that the way forward is to make greater use of open and distance learning (ODL), whether in the form of print-based distance learning courses, interactive radio, computer-based learning or web-based learning. These methods offer more education for the same unit of resource, easier access and higher quality than can be obtained by traditional methods in countries with poorly financed education systems.' (Moore and Tait, 2002, p.19)

ODL Systems & Education & Rehabilitation of CWSN

A. Importance/Significance

The advent of technology and open and distance learning 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 materials from home, which is seen as the safest, least expensive as well as least restrictive environment. This could be incorporated with occasional attendance at local study centers and a form of blended learning that incorporates Open Education Resources (OERs) such as Open Learn (Khokhar, 2007).

Hurley (2001) states that, "best practice suggests that guidance and support should be matched to the needs of the student population and be sufficient for that population (p. 22). This describes very well the challenge for institutions to implement distance learning into excluded communities in an effort to allow them to participate in a supported environment.

According to UNICEF ROSA (2009), given the right policy and infrastructural framework, ODL can support five areas in basic education, including educational provision in conflict and disaster areas:

- providing para-formal or alternative schooling systems
- supporting successful transition to, and performance within, formal schools
- raising quality by providing ready-made educational resources (formal or non-formal)
- providing networks and training for intermediaries (e.g. teachers, broadcasters, mentors)
- providing communication for development (C4D) strategies (e.g. health, school readiness advocacy).

MHRD (2011) in its "Working Group Report on Secondary and Vocational Education: 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017)" states that "The open schooling system is meant to supplement and complement the formal system to provide "education for all", especially for educational development of disadvantaged groups, particularly the scheduled castes (SCs), the scheduled tribes (STs), minorities, other backward castes (OBCs) and **differently-abled people**. The Open schools in the country (NIOS and the State Open Schools) would have to take up this agenda vigorously so that vulnerable sections of the society and those living in difficult contexts may also reap the benefits of education. The basic philosophy of such approach is to reach the unreached and unreachable." It further says that "Special Programmes will need to be developed for **differently-abled learners**……….An inclusive approach on vocational education needs to be adopted. Special vocational training programmes in institutions like NIOS, IGNOU and such other institutions imparting education in the distant mode of education across the country should be promoted".

To facilitate the process of educating the children with special needs, the ―Foundation course on Education of Children with Disabilities" was launched by the RCI in the year 2003 with the basic aim to develop understanding and basic competencies in teacher for dealing children with special needs. At present the above programme is being offered through distance mode by three Open Universities i.e. IGNOU, MPBOU & NEHU. RCI has also launched "Foundation Course on Education of Children with Disabilities – Online" in 2011.

B. Key-Issues

The **"Distance Education Cell"** for monitoring the Distance Education programmes was established by the Rehabilitation Council of India in the year 2001.The responsibilities of this **"Cell"** expanded and subsequently due to increase in number of programmes, an **"OUTREACH DIVISION"** was established in April 2004. This division is responsible for promoting, maintaining, monitoring, and coordinating the special education programs (s) offered through Open and Distance Learning system across the country. In order to safeguard the interest of the students with special needs, and to ensure the quality of special education programmes, the norms & guidelines-2010 has been framed for regulating & monitoring the Open Learning Institutions. Certain key-issues which need immediate attention and action in the area of education and rehabilitation of CWSN through ODL systems are as follows:

1. **ACCESS**

The issue of access is of paramount importance. The ODL Systems need to accommodate CWSN in all possible ways. Today, CWSN and their care-givers are almost ignorant of opportunities being provided by ODL Systems, if any. Need is being felt for initiating programmes which can be pursued by CWSN along with normals or specifically meant for them. Also, efforts are required to increase awareness among masses about such initiatives. There are courses, both for training and sensitization purposes, available for capacity-building but rarely for CWSN.

2. POLICIES AND STRUCTURES
In the wake of UNCRPD, different Acts and policies, including National Policy on Disability and PD Act, are being modified. It is high time that modifications be made regarding role and responsibility of ODL Systems with regard to education and rehabilitation of CWSN.

3. FUNDING
We feel that money is not a constraint with regard to education and rehabilitation of CWSN by ODL systems. What is required is prioritization and accountability.

4. CURRICULUM
Functional curriculum focusing individualization is the need of the hour. It is not only required for CWSN but children from low SES families, first generation learners, slow learners, girls and children from marginalized groups etc also need such a curriculum. Adequate modifications should be made in curriculum through wide consultation with experts working at the ground level in different areas. Cohesion and cooperation should be solicited.

5. ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION/ SYSTEM OF EXAMINATION
Examination reforms are required in ODL systems as well. Keeping pace with technological advances and knowledge generated in the areas of pedagogies and evaluation, modifications/adaptations are required.

6. COORDINATION BETWEEN FORMAL & INFORMAL SYSTEMS
As far as education and rehabilitation of CWSN in ODL systems is concerned, a better coordination between formal and informal/non-formal systems is required. Particularly, ODL systems need to utilize resources of formal system more effectively and more judiciously.

7. PROVIDING ADEQUATE LEVELS OF TRAINING TO KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Adequate levels of training should be provided to all, particularly key stake-holders. These stake-holders include ministers, policy-planners, administrative officers, teachers, coordinators and resource-developers among others. Proper training to these in issues, concerns, and adaptations required with respect to inclusion is essential.

8. INADEQUATE RESOURCES
Print-material, number of study centers, teachers, counselors, courses, and online support are inadequate in number as well as quality when it comes to education and rehabilitation of CWSN in ODL systems. These should be revamped on a priority if we wish to contribute in realization of SSA/EFA goals in our country with particular emphasis on CWSN in ODL systems.

9. ATTITUDES & SENSITIZATION
Attitudinal barriers are hampering education and rehabilitation of CWSN in ODL systems as well as in formal system. Efforts are needed to foster positive attitudes towards CWSN in general and their education and rehabilitation in particular. 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 CWSN is immediately desired. Misconceptions and prejudices should be warded off.

10. **COLLABORATION BETWEEN DIFFERENT MINISTRIES (MHRD vs MSJE)**

In India, a major problem with regard to many issues related to education lies in poor coordination and ego-issues among different administrative bodies involved, particularly different ministries. Paradoxically, Special education and related issues come under the purview of Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment whereas Education, basic, secondary, and/or higher, comes under Ministry of Human Resource Development. This often results in chaos. A strong need is felt to bring all education issues, including special education, in control of one ministry, preferably MHRD. It is also desirable that all education be brought into center's list from concurrent list so that center-state relations do not mingle with education issues. If it is not possible, let the two ministries learn to cooperate and collaborate on such important issue of national importance. Establishing a National University of Special Education to control/collaborate all endeavors pertaining to education and rehabilitation of CWSN under one umbrella may be a good idea.

11. **RESEARCH**

Research is the best tool available to generate and/or validate knowledge scientifically in a given field. The area of education and rehabilitation of CWSN through ODL systems is not an exception. RCI (2011) recommend initiating research to determine the efficacy of distance education programs and that teachers should use research-based practices.

According to Shukla (2007), some of the areas where India is facing challenges in mobilizing social resources with regard to education and rehabilitation of CWSN are –

- Attitude shift
- Mapping of Children & persons with disabilities to make need based provisions
- Training of teachers working in large number of mainstream schools in pedagogy and management of inclusive classrooms
- Shift from welfare to right based approach
- Accountability of organizations and community towards persons with disabilities
- Establishing effective linkages/networking among institutions and departments
- Lack of trained personnel to work with community in disability sector
- Adapting aids and making places of public utility accessible to persons with disabilities
- Creating infrastructural support, and
- Employment.

In line with these and other considerations, the report of UNICEF ROSA (2009) makes five recommendations with regard to education and rehabilitation of CWSN through ODL systems:

1. Educational planners could re-examine the statistical, analytical and conceptual basis from which they work in relation to these groups of hard-to-reach children.
2. Educational planning needs to be built on a comprehensive mapping and evaluation of current provision in terms of its scale and effectiveness. However, a fine balance needs to be achieved between the creation of enabling frameworks (which facilitate inclusiveness and coherence for the learner) and over-bureaucratic frameworks (which drive the NFE sector away from the formal system).

3. Governments need to accept the importance of alternative and flexible routes to access formal qualifications, and to actively establish such a route, which is built on a system of credit accumulation and transfer. This on its own will have a significant impact on opening up access for hard-to-reach groups, and has the potential to provide a route to recognized qualifications for NGOs and other NFE providers.
4. More attention needs to be paid to the potential of ODL in supporting teachers and other intermediaries involved in basic education.
5. **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.

Summing Up

NCERT (2006) states that "It is important to bring about a number of reforms at various levels in order to develop a 'school for all' having an inclusive curriculum". This is also true for ODL Systems. The purpose of the present paper is to address the pressures upon the regular education sector to meet the learning needs of classified students within reasonable budget parameters and challenges present or possible for ODL systems in the area of education and rehabilitation of CWSN. The ODL systems have been proved to be cost-effective. These often reduce the need for additional on-site specially-trained staff. Therefore, there is a reduction in recurring expenses. There is also a degree of self-instruction, self-assessment, self-monitoring and self-pacing in the ODL systems. Interaction with the teacher is flexible. The demand on the teacher to be continuously present is less. Overall, once the support infrastructure is in place, distance learning offers a viable flexible alternative for teaching students with disabilities.

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