



Development in early stages of children with special needs in contemporary education: Concerns, challenges and pathways

Dr. Susmita Ram¹, Vaibhav Verma^{2*}, Dr. Jijo Varghese³

¹ Associate Professor, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

² Research Scholar & CLMLMS Fellow, Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

³ Assistant Professor, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

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Abstract

National Education Policy 2020 has set up guidelines for filling the abysses in contemporary education and stipulates pathways for each stage of a child's progress in education. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2023) provides a more detailed roadmap for each stage, based on the development needs of children. The present study is focussed on the prerequisites of children with special needs at early stages of development. This has been carried out by consulting special educators from both, urban and rural areas across India. The study examines their perceptions of the value of national educational policy and the national framework for the foundational stages of the curriculum. The study highlights the major practical issues, challenges, and potential solutions for children with special needs at early stages of development based on the dialogue with special educators.

Keywords: Disability, special needs, special educators, CwSN concerns, CwSN challenges, pathways, ECCD

Introduction

The first six years of children are crucial for their overall development (Anderson *et al*, 2003; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000) ^[9, 10]. Children at the early years develop more rapidly than at any other stage. The importance of early years for brain development has been well established by brain research studies (Black *et al*, 2017; Bruer, 1999) ^[2, 3]. Fostering an encouraging and stimulating atmosphere in these early stages provides a base for lifelong learning. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) positively impact children's long-term development and learning. The nature of childhood and the socialisation process have been the subject of philosophical speculation. The perceptions postulated by Rousseau, Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori have paved the way for hands-on and experiential learning activities that frame today's curriculum for education in the early stages of development. The incorporation of these components into classroom was influenced by their understanding of child's active engagement, the value of playing and discovery, art, music, and movement.

Many Indian philosophers have also drawn inspiration from their observations of young children and their understanding the child's interest in learning by active involvement. The ideas highlighted by Tagore, Aurobindo, Gijubhai Badekha, and Tarabai Modak include the notion that education should be given to children in their mother tongue, connected to their social and cultural surroundings, and including the community in the learning process. Since language is the fundamental means of self-expression, a child can express themselves freely in their mother tongue.

The early childhood programmes provide opportunities for holistic development and learning. The ECCE curriculum must be based on the developmental and contextual needs of the children, supplying more competency inputs and a supportive atmosphere. A standard "curriculum" was seen to

be inappropriate for all children, instead an individualised approach is specified. The majority of the ECCE programmes currently available, however, do not provide developmentally appropriate programmes for the young child due to varied practical realities.

In the absence of a curriculum framework, either a minimalist programme or a downward extension of the primary stage curriculum has been implemented, which might overload the child and impair their ability to learn.

The construction of a planned curricular framework with flexibility for contextualization and the variety of requirements of young children is necessary to enable the best possible development for all children. In order to guarantee that crucial subject areas are covered and that the young child's developmental needs are met, a curricular framework is also necessary. In order to guarantee a certain level of quality and address the significant variability in the ECCE programmes offered to young children in India, it also promotes the adoption of a consistent pedagogical approach.

The National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum Framework, which is intended for all young children under the age of six, is in line with the government's vision for ECCE as outlined in the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy. The National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005), which outlines the curriculum within, and the Position Paper on ECCE (National Curriculum Framework) serve as the basis for the National ECCE Curriculum Framework. The NEP 2020 expands the understanding of ECCE to include children between three to eight years of age.

This inclusion focuses on the process of modifying the educational system, and social environment so that all children, regardless of differences, may have the chance to interact, play, learn, work, and develop in accordance with their potentials and challenges. Through an inclusive

education strategy, students with special needs and disabilities—regardless of their age or conditions—are given the proper instruction in regular classrooms. Programs known as "interventions" involve evaluation, placement, and curriculum, environment, and facility adaptations to make them more accessible to people with disabilities and able to meet the needs of a range of special needs learners. Children with special needs, according to the Child Care Law Centre, are those who need some kind of special care because of their physical, mental, emotional, or health issues. All children, even those with the same impairment or special need, cannot be cared for with a single technique because each child is unique and has different needs. (Mahmoud & Ibrahim, 2019) ^[7]. In India, a comparable institution is the Centre for Child and the Law (CCL) established at the National Law School of India which is working to shape and improve laws governing child care access, helps families and child care workers navigate complex regulations and focuses on prioritizing marginalized communities and groups facing discrimination.

Disability, according to Weitz (2001), refers to a decreased capacity to carry out tasks one would ordinarily carry out at a certain stage of life, which may lead to stigmatisation or discrimination against the person with a disability. Learners with and without special needs are taught together as much as is practical in a setting that is as unrestrictive as feasible through a method known as integration. We anticipate that a youngster will adjust to their surroundings.

This study aims to identify the key practical issues, challenges, and potential solutions for young children with special needs. It does so through the lens of special educators from both urban and rural regions in India. Additionally, it looks at how they view the importance of the national educational policy (NEP-2020) and the national framework (NCF-2023) for the foundational stage of the curriculum.

The New Education Policy 2020 guarantees that all issues of education for children with disabilities will be addressed. According to the policy, children with special needs (CwSN), also known as Divyang, should have the same opportunities to receive a high-quality education as other children, and addresses the need of developing supporting mechanisms to make this possible. The policy emphasizes an inclusive education model; wherein disabled children will be able to participate completely in the entire educational process from the Foundational Stage to higher education. NCERT will make sure that specialist organisations like the National Institutes of DEPwD are consulted in creating the National Curriculum Framework. Resources will be made available to schools and school complexes to ensure integration of children with impairments. All disabled children will be able to access facilities without any obstacles. Materials for teaching and learning as well as assistive equipment will be made available. It is imperative to begin the process of hiring special educators with cross-disability training for children with severe or multiple disabilities. NIOS will create top-notch modules to teach Indian Sign Language.

Children with disabilities will receive the necessary care to ensure their safety and security. Children with disabilities who are unable to attend school will still have the option of home-based education, and they will be treated equally with other kids in the general education system. To ensure that all

students with learning disabilities have equal access to opportunities, assessment and certification organisations, such as the envisioned new National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, would develop criteria for performing assessments from the early grades to higher education. All teacher education programmes will incorporate awareness of and understanding of how to teach students with unique disabilities. Finally, subject to a well-planned implementation of the policy, the aforementioned reforms and changes can aid children with disabilities in gaining increased access to quality education, employment, health, and other services as well as in developing a better awareness of their rights. This will improve their quality of life. (Ahmed, 2021)

Resources will be made available to schools for the integration of students with disabilities, the hiring of special educators with cross-disability training, and the development of resource centres wherever they are required, especially for students with severe or multiple disabilities. In accordance with the RPWD Act, all disabled children will be allowed to receive services without any barriers. Schools will seek to ensure that all students with disabilities have the accommodations and support systems necessary to enable their full participation and inclusion in the classroom. For example, textbooks in accessible forms like big print and Braille will be made available to enable children with disabilities integrate more readily into classrooms and connect with teachers and their classmates. All school activities, including those in the arts, athletics, and vocational education, will be covered by this. To teach Indian Sign Language, excellent modules will be created. The protection and safety of children with impairments will receive the necessary attention. (Kishore, 2021) ^[5]

Training general educators in the area of disabilities will help them meet the needs of all CWSN categories and use ICT. Offering a curriculum to help MR, HI, VI, and SI get ready for school and build their skills. Providing financial help is not adequate by itself; many other aspects need to be addressed for education of CWSN. These include IEPs, curriculum access, building synergy with special schools, research and development, and education of teachers and other stakeholders. Social access to CWSN, including parental education, peer sensitization, awareness raising, and the development of stakeholder awareness at all levels. In addition, girls with disabilities are to receive special attention (Kishore, 2022) ^[6].

The major concerns and issues in India with regard to the education of children with special needs are: Teachers and therapists are inadequate in number; regular teachers lack knowledge about the types of disabilities and enrolment of very few CWSN girls. Furthermore, there is a gap between children leaving elementary school and their entry into secondary education. The state and district levels have a lack of effective and organised supervision and monitoring systems. Parents from CWSN and special teachers are not represented in SMDC. (*Inclusive Education for CWSN Scheme Information – Guidelines*, n.d.)

Objectives

This study aimed to collect various data from special educators for achieving the main objectives as mentioned below:

1. To identify the major practical concerns and challenges at Early Developmental Stages of Children with Special

Needs in Contemporary Education according to Special Educators with reference to their Geographical region and Gender.

- To identify the pathways for the betterment with reference to early developmental stages of Children with Special Needs in contemporary education from special educators' vision.
- To study the opinions of Special Educators on the effect of directions provided in the NEP 2020 with reference to Children with Special Needs.
- To know the opinion of Special Educators on the effectiveness of NCF for the Foundational Stages with reference to Children with Special Needs.

Scope and Limitations

The focus of this research is to pinpoint the relevant issues, difficulties, and potential strategies for the early development of children with special needs in India through the perspective of special educators of both rural and urban regions. An online survey was used to collect the data for this study. Subsequent research using a larger quantitative data set would be required to establish the generalizability of the study's findings.

Methods and Procedure

This is Exploratory research. The survey method was used in obtaining data to attain the objectives of this study. the researcher administered an online survey form, distributed using digital platforms. Convenient sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was employed. The study's objectives were achieved by using a structured questionnaire created through focus group discussion, qualitative item analysis and validated by three external experts.

Results and Discussion

Participation of special educators in this survey can be seen in table 1. A total of 18 entries were received in which 9 were from urban region consisting of 3 female and 6 male participants and 9 were from rural region consisting of 5 female and 4 male participants respectively.

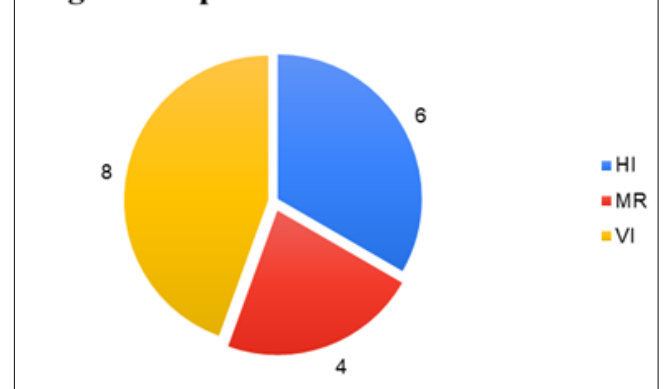
Table 1: Participation (N=18)

Geographical Region	Gender	Count
Urban	Female	3
	Male	6
Rural	Female	5
	Male	4
Grand Total		18

Source: Survey responses.

The special educators belonged to the following three categories: Visual Impairment (eight participants); Hearing Impairment (six participants) and Mentally Retarded (four participants) The same can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1. Specialisation of Educators



The survey inquired opinions from participants regarding the challenges faced by children with special needs. The major challenges turned out to be Social Isolation/ fear of unacceptance by society (83.33%), Improper Early Diagnosis of special needs (83.33%), Lack of Special Educators (66.67%), Fear of the Future in terms of academic progress (55%), Lack of Inclusive Resources (50%), Lack of empathetic behaviour by peers (44.44%), Improper Parental Support (27.78%) and Lack of Individual support (22.22%) respectively. The complete details can be seen from table 2.

Table 2: Practical Concerns/Challenges (N=18)

	Yes (%)	To Some Extent (%)	No (%)
Lack of Special Educators	66.67	27.78	5.56
Lack of Inclusive Resources	50.00	33.33	16.67
Improper Parental Support	27.78	72.22	-
Lack of Individual support	22.22	61.11	16.67
Social Isolation/ fear of unacceptance by society	83.33	16.67	-
Fear of the Future in terms of academic progress	55.56	38.89	5.56
Improper Early Diagnosis of special needs	83.33	16.67	-
Lack of empathetic behavior by peers	44.44	55.56	-

Source: Survey responses.

The recommendations of the special educators included: Early diagnosis under supervision by a professional special educator (83.33%), Availability and Proper utilization of Inclusive resources (72.22%), Training sessions for General Educators to promote inclusivity in classroom (72.22%), Emphasis on learning innovations for CwSN at early

developmental stages (66.67%), Training for Healthy Parental Support (61.11%), Emphasis on strengthening self confidence in CwSN (61.11%), Proper empathetic learning environment (55.56%) and Using relevant and regular community resources (50%) respectively. These details can be seen in table 3.

Table 3: Potential Solutions/Pathways (N=18)

	Yes	To Some Extent	No
Trainings for Healthy Parental Support	61.11	38.89	-
Using relevant and regular community resources	50.00	33.33	16.67
Emphasis on learning innovations for CwSN at early developmental stages	66.67	27.78	5.56
Proper empathetic learning environment	55.56	44.44	-
Early diagnosis under supervision by a professional special educator	83.33	16.67	-
Availability and Proper utilization of Inclusive resources	72.22	27.78	-
Emphasis on strengthening self confidence in CwSN	61.11	38.89	-
Training sessions for General Educators to promote inclusivity in classroom	72.22	22.22	5.56

Source: Survey responses.

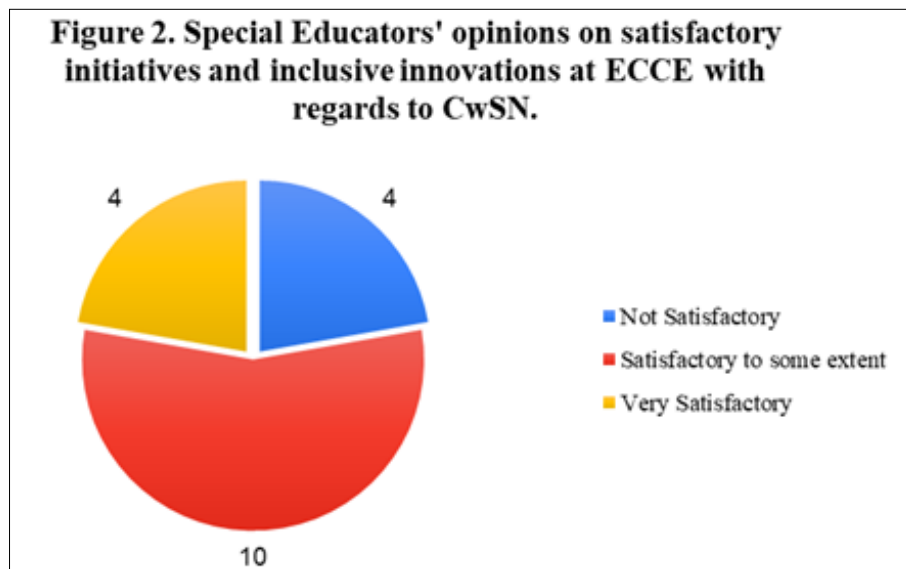
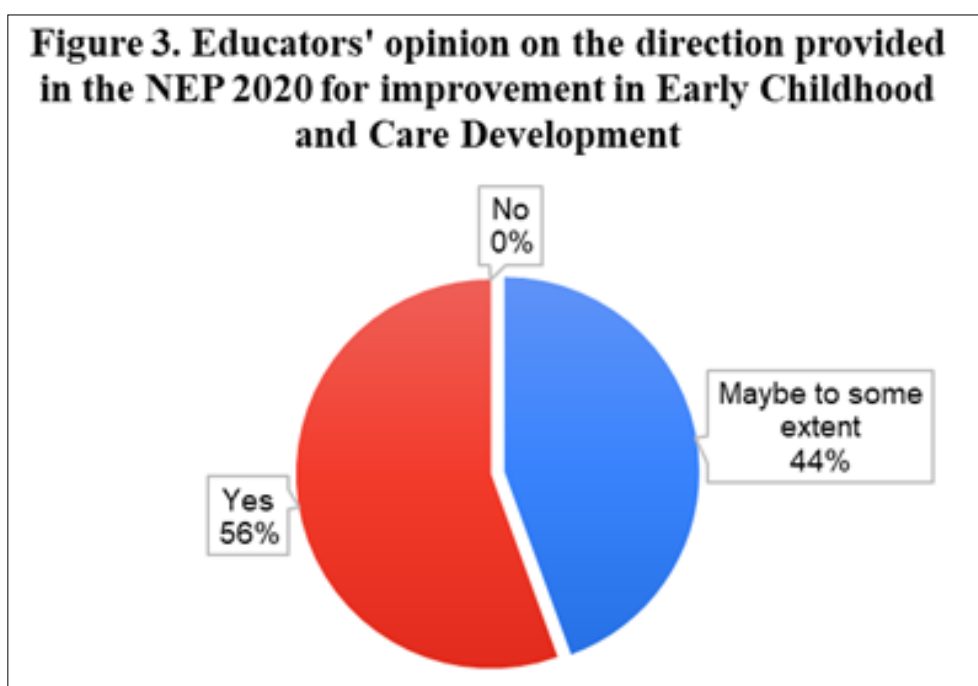


Fig 2: represents the satisfaction level of special educators on the initiatives and inclusive innovations for early childhood and care education with regards to children with special needs. 22.2% of the educators believed these to be very satisfactory, 55.5% believed these to be satisfactory to some extent, and 22.2% stated that these are not satisfactory

The opinions of educators for improvement for children with special needs at early developmental stages as per the directions provided in the national education policy 2020 can be

seen in figure 3. 56% educators think it will improve the contemporary conditions and 44% it will be helpful to some extent; no special educator thought it to be not advantageous.



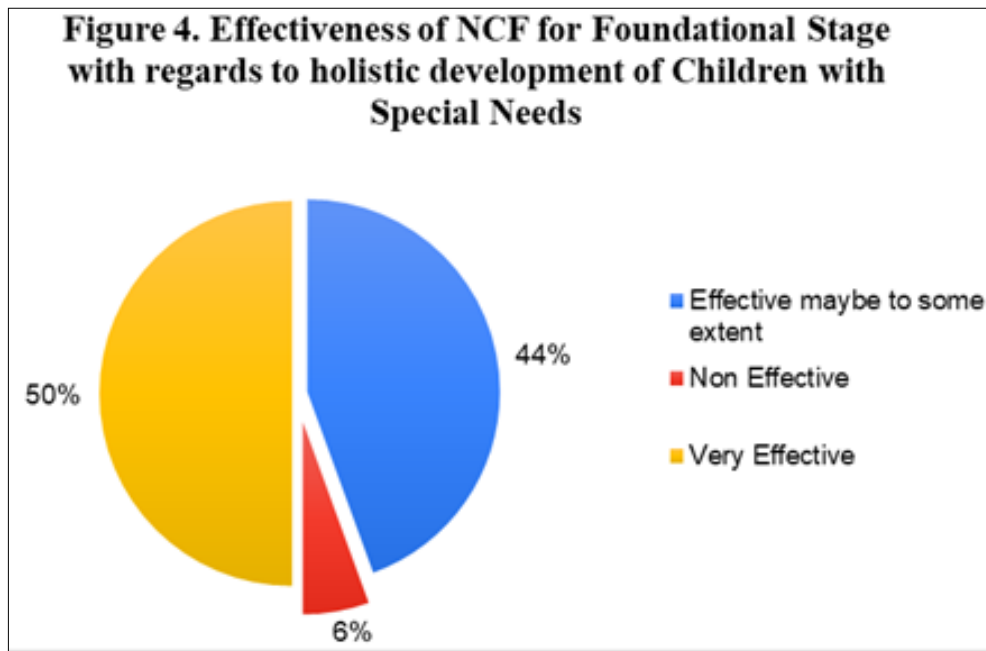


Fig 4: depicts the opinions of special educators on the effectiveness of National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stages with regards to holistic development of Children with Special Needs, in which 50% believed it to be very effective, followed by 44% and 6% who think it to be effective to some extent; and non-effective respectively

Conclusion

This study determined the opinions of special educators on the various factors that could improve the effectiveness of the curriculum for Foundational Stages with regards to holistic development of Children with Special Needs. The major challenges determined by them were Social Isolation/fear of unacceptance by society, Improper Early Diagnosis of special needs, Lack of Special Educators, Fear of the Future in terms of academic progress and Lack of Inclusive Resources. The special educators also recommended Early diagnosis under supervision by a professional special educator, Availability and Proper utilization of Inclusive resources, Training sessions for General Educators to promote inclusivity in classroom, Emphasis on learning innovations for CwSN at early developmental stages, Training for Healthy Parental Support and Emphasis on strengthening self confidence in CwSN. Many special educators had confidence in the initiatives and inclusive innovations at early childhood and care education with regards to children with special needs were satisfactory to some extent and stated that the guidelines provided in the national education policy 2022 are likely to improve the contemporary condition of education with regards to children with special needs. Majority of the special educators believe that the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stages with regards to holistic development of Children with Special Needs would be very effective.

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