Developing Learner-Centric Practices, Skills & Support Systems for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups: A NEP 2020 Perspective

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Abstract

India is a country with diversity. Many diverse groups exist, many of which lag behind because of social and economic constraints. NEP (2020) called all these marginalized and disadvantaged groups as Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Providing quality education accessible to all is a foremost task in countries all over the world. In countries like India where diversity is its main characteristic, it becomes necessary to take proper and immediate actions to identify and cater different learning needs of diverse learners. For this, it is needed to first develop some learner-centric practices from which SEDGs can get the benefit. It is also required to train teachers and develop those skills & Support Systems that can help and promote SEDGs. NEP 2020 has significantly focused on the betterment of SEDGs from primary to higher education. The present paper addresses a pressing issue in education i.e. student diversity and their inclusion. In this paper types of diversity, strategies for inclusion of SEDGs, and few recommendations given by NEP 2020, The Action plan for implementing those recommendations has been discussed.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Recommendation, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

1.   Introduction

Millions of people in the world are deprived of access to basic amenities and education, just because they are different from others based on gender, caste, religion, physical or mental abilities, economic status habitation etc. NEP 2020 has identified different Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) as gender identities (Female/Transgender), socio-cultural identities (Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Castes (OBC), and Minorities), geographical identities (rural, small cities), Children with Special Needs (CWSNs)

and socio-economic conditions (migrants, low incomes, vulnerable children, victims of trafficking, orphans, urban poor), and females of these SEDGs (Section 6.2, p. 24). These groups need multidimensional inclusion like social, economic, and educational. All these types of inclusion are highly interrelated, any exclusion closes the door to another type of inclusion. Educational inclusion among these is most crucial and leads to better long-term outcomes. Ensuring educational inclusion is a big challenge for educational policymakers, planners, administrators, and teachers. There are several SEDGs that face multiple challenges in the educational systems at all stages of the educational process administration, pedagogical practices, assessment, and placement. There is a need of the hour to understand this diversion, know about their needs, and make possible ways to cater their needs at all stages i.e. from the Foundational stage to the Higher Education, and all parts i.e. from making them aware to get enrolment to get placement according to their needs.

2.   Types of Student Diversity

There are different types of student diversities such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning styles, gender, religious beliefs, language, age, etc. some of the students are differently abled. They may have any one or more type of disabilities like Physical Disabilities, Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Locomotor Disability, Intellectual Disability, Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia) etc.

3.   Strategies for Inclusion

NEP (2020) highlights the significance of equal and equitable opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their social and economic background. This has led to healthy discussions on issues of inequality and exclusion in primary to higher education (Raj, 2024) in recent years. Identifying and categorizing SEDGs will give a clear direction to plan ways and strategies to include them in the mainstream and provide ways for their equal access to education. Apart from providing equal access to educational institutions, retention, and inclusion of children of SEDGs is a great challenge. There are some measures by which the problem of student's diversity and their inclusion can be addressed:

3.1 Change in Attitudes and Values of Stakeholders

 The most important measure in this regard is a change in attitudes and values of all stakeholders of education. This includes respect to the individuality, value of equity and equality, respect for others' cultural & religious beliefs, democratic values, tolerance, social justice, human rights, gender parity, etc.

3.2 Providing Learner Support

Developing learner support mechanisms is another important measure to achieve the goals of inclusive education. Educational institutions, parents, and society need to play roles at their part. Teachers, senior students, and members of society can play the role of mentors for the students facing the problems of exclusion. These students should be provided with the facilities of tutors in areas of their weakness. Counseling is another important support that can help these students identify their strengths & limitations and identify their goals and means to achieve those goals. Technology can play a tremendous role in the inclusion of students of SEDGs. Thus, technological support is also needed. New technological aids and assistive devices can be provided to them and knowledge to use these devices should be provided. Educational institutions should create inclusive learning environments in the school and classrooms. Such environment ensures that every learner feels comfortable and adjusted in the learning process. Teachers should use Universal Design for Learning principles and guidelines (CAST, 2024), which suggests to use of multiple ways of assessment as learners have multiple ways of actions and expression, so they should be assessed in the way they want to express. Also, multiple ways of engagement and multiple ways of representation should be used while teaching and engaging the class (CAST, 2024).

3.3 Developing Learners' Skills

Making the learners capable of preparing their own path and ways of educational inclusion can give wonderful outcomes. Digital skills are one of the most important skills in the present time which help them in accessing the world of knowledge. Other learner skills that need to be developed are collaboration, communication critical thinking, metacognition, self-directed learning etc. Learners equipped with such skills will not feel themselves excluded from the educational system.

3.4 Developing Teacher Competencies

To effectively address diversity and inclusion in the school & classrooms, teachers need to develop a range of competencies, skills, abilities, attitudes, and values.

3.4.1 Knowledge & Understanding: In order to develop awareness and understanding the student diversities and measures of their inclusion, teachers need to have knowledge and understanding of student diversities, disabilities, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Teachers need to have knowledge of traditions, beliefs, practices, and assumptions of religious, linguistic, racial and other types of minorities. Teachers should also identify their own biases and prejudices and act upon to overcome them. Social media and electronic media in the present time are highly contributing in strengthening biases and prejudices of teachers and students, hence mindful use of social media may help teachers in removing biases and prejudices.

3.4.2 Skills and abilities: The teaching profession in the present time has become highly professional and challenging. Teachers must develop some skills and abilities to cope with the challenges. The inclusion of SEDGs is a big challenge for teachers. They should develop various skills to promote inclusion one of the most important skills is effective communication so that teachers may communicate with students of SEDGs clearly and respectfully. Teachers must develop the skill of listening attentively and patiently to the students of these groups. The ability to work with the community makes teachers feel and sensitize the problems of SEDGs and develop insight to find solutions for the same. Understanding the feelings of others is also of crucial importance for teachers. Different schools operate in different types of socio-cultural environments. One way of solving the problem may work in one school but not another. Therefore, teachers must develop adaptability to the environment where they work. The teacher must develop the ability to solve the problems and resolve the conflicts. Teachers should think critically and predict the immediate and long-term consequences of exclusion, hence should think about different & creative ways of inclusion.

3.4.3 Teachers Attitudes and Values: One's attitudes govern his/her actions. Teachers' attitudes and values motivate him/her to make the right decisions to promote inclusion. Respect for others' cultures, religions, beliefs, and individuality helps in creating an inclusive environment. Equity and equality are the other important values of a teacher that help him/her be non-discriminative towards students. Teachers must have a positive attitude toward life. A

person with this attitude looks at the positive aspects of others that make him/her supportive and friendly. Teachers must have open-mindedness as this attitude makes him/her receptive to the changes in the environment. The teacher should be a lifelong learner. This attitude makes him/her an effective teacher. Teachers should learn new skills, pedagogies & content that helps him/her to develop an inclusive environment.

3.4.4 NEP 2020 Recommendations about Student Diversities and Inclusion

NEP 2020 has recommended that there should be initiatives through education system to ensure that all students from historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups, despite inherent obstacles are provided various targeted opportunities to enter and excel in the educational system.

In NEP 2020 document Equitable/ Equity/ Equality terms have been used 83 times, Inclusive/ Inclusion 36 times, Diversity 11 times, For All 40 times, Disadvantaged 33 times, Divyang 4 times, Disabilities 35 times, and Gaps 5 times. This shows that NEP 2020 lays great emphasis on the issue of inclusion. All the above-mentioned terms reflecting student diversity & inclusion have been used more than 250 times in the policy document.

4.1 Major Principles of NEP 2020 related to inclusion

The NEP 2020 has given the fundamental principles to give directions to the whole education system in order to provide quality education to all. Out of those fundamental principles following principles are directly related to education of SEDGs:

- Recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student

- Achieving foundational literacy and numeracy by all students by grade 3

- Flexibility in learning and no hard separations are there in any domain

- Multidisciplinary and holistic education

- Promoting multilingualism and the power of language

- Extensive use of technology

- Respect for diversity and respect for the local context

- Full equity and inclusion

- Education is a public service

4.2 Equity & Inclusion in School Education

NEP 2020 has laid a great emphasis on inclusion from the foundational level to the secondary level. As per the new structure (5+3+3+4) of school education the policy has targeted the universal provisions of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) by 2030 (Section 1.1, p. 7). High-quality ECCE Anganwadi will be established, Ashramshalas will be established in tribal-dominated areas (Section 1.6, 1.7 & 1.8, p. 7-8). Alternative schooling will be another way of inclusion of SEDGs. NEP 2020 targets that fundamental literacy and numeracy by grade 3 will be attained by 2025. This will help in reducing dropouts from school education. Digital infrastructure for knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) has been developed to provide a platform for teachers and students to share knowledge. NEP recommends that a 100% Gross enrolment ratio (GER) from pre-school to secondary will be achieved by 2030. Multiple pathways for learning (formal, and non-formal education) will be used for inclusion. Providing high-quality infrastructure, bilingual textbooks, one-on-one tutoring, mentoring, and counselling are the other measures that will help in addressing student diversity and inclusion.

4.3 Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

NEP 2020 envisions ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, with a special emphasis on SEDGs. NEP 2020 has specified the steps to be taken by the governments and by the higher education institutions separately. Governments will allocate funds for education of SEDGs, Clear targets will be set for higher GER for SEDGs. Gender Balance will be enhanced in admission in HEIs, and more high-quality HEIs will be established in aspirational districts & Special Educational Zones (SEZs) containing a larger number of SEDGs and providing scholarships to students belonging to SEDGs. The main purpose is to spread education in the most rural and unreachable areas of India (Sahoo, 2020). Support

technology tools will be developed & used for better participation and improved learning outcomes.

Creating an inclusive learning environment in HEIs is essential for promoting a sense of belonging among students who belong to SEDGs (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2022). Higher education institutions have to take some measures to provide inclusion such as conducting outreach programs on higher education opportunities & scholarships among SEDGs and making their admission process and the curriculum more inclusive. The employability potential of higher education programs will be increased.

4.4 Actions to be taken

NEP 2020 suggests many actions to be taken to address the issue of diversity & inclusion like; targeted scholarships. Conditional cash transfer, providing bicycles, establishing Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in aspirational districts, creation of gender-inclusive fund for girls and transgenders, providing boarding facilities, strengthening and establishing additional Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Kastoorba Gandhi Vidyalaya and Central Schools, developing schools complex, barrier-free access, identification of learning disabilities at early stage, flexible curricula, appropriate assessment, reforming teacher education, alternative forms of schooling, integrating vocational and academic education etc. All these measures will help SEDGs to join, retain, and excel in the educational system.

4.5 Addressing diversity and Inclusion to achieve the Goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047

Addressing diversity & inclusion issues are must to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047. Inclusion will help us in developing an equitable and just society that will lead to peace & harmony. Inclusion will create human capital by providing quality education to all. Inclusion will increase the productivity of human resources which will help in maximizing the demographic dividend. The age composition shows that India is a young country. This is the right time to become rich before we turn into an old country.

Inclusion will strengthen the demographic values and protect human rights. The goal of a prosperous harmonious happy and developed India by 2047 can be achieved by social,

economic, and educational inclusion of the socio-economically deprived and marginalized population.

5. Conclusion

India is well known due to its diverse culture, large population, and democratic values, and despite having such a large and diverse population unity is its biggest feature. As the largest democracy in the world, India actively involves its citizens in the formulation of different policies. NEP 2020 is also one example of this. The implementation of the New Education Policy (NEP, 2020) by the Government of India is a source of hopefulness during the difficulties presented by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Raj, 2024). NEP recommendations and further related guidelines and documents all aim to make education bias-free and try to include all marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the mainstream. The policy seeks to achieve universal access to high-quality education, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations Agenda 2030 (Sengupta, 2021). Its different recommendations are clear and easy to implement and in the Favor of all. Different organizations like the University Grant Commission (UGC) and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) are continuously working on different action plans and guidelines to make NEP 2020 recommendations easy to implement. Very soon we shall achieve the the goal of inclusion of SEDGs if all stakeholders related to Education will give their full and productive efforts to make this possible. Hence now it is time for all stakeholders to take some significant actions, to provide equitable and high-quality access of education to all, at least in their nearby locality, or in the organization where they are working. This little effort can make education accessible to those who are at the last, the least, and the lost conditions in India. Only by this the vision of NEP 2020 to transform Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, thereby making India a global knowledge superpower will be achieved (NEP, 2020, P. 6).

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