

# SPECIAL EDUCATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this section the learner will be able to:

- explain the concepts of special education, inclusive education and support services.
  - describe the concept of disability and different types of disability in children.
  - explain the knowledge and skills required for a career in Special Education and allied support services.
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## SIGNIFICANCE

The term education is familiar to all of us. But, 'special education' may be a new expression for some of you. It is a term that refers to educational provisions for children with **special needs**, emerging due to physical, mental and emotional challenges. Therefore, they have Special Educational Needs (SEN). Thus Special Education means specially designed instruction for children with above mentioned challenges in all settings such as classroom, home, workplace, public places, the street and the rehabilitation homes, etc.

There are children who may have unusual difficulty in walking, playing, talking, seeing and hearing, in interacting socially or in doing what one may

consider usual. They are likely to have disabilities due to certain conditions such as hearing impairment, visual impairment or intellectual impairment (a more detailed discussion about types of disabilities follows later). In order to learn, work and experience the world optimally, they have to try harder and people around them have to enable them in their endeavour.

**ACTIVITY 1**

Can you think of a child who has any of the above listed difficulties? If not, ask a member of your family or a neighbour if she/he knows one such child. Try to meet, observe and interact with any such child/person(s). Write down a few lines about experiences and special needs of the child. Find out if she/he goes to school. If yes, which school, if no, why not?

Children's Special Educational Needs (SEN) are met through certain methodologies of special education. Special education is not segregated or *exclusive education* of students with disabilities. It is an approach that facilitates their learning and allows them to participate in different activities that they may not have had access to on account of their inability to go to school. Hence, children with special needs do not have to always study in a separate institution. In fact, most of them can learn quite well in general classes of a school. However, some children who have severe difficulties, due to the nature of their disability, may benefit greatly from being educated in a classroom prepared exclusively for them, as a smaller number of students are grouped together, where the educator interacts with the students on a one-to-one basis. The educators/teachers who provide special education are called Special Educators.

When children/ students with SEN study in general classrooms with their peers, the arrangement is called '*inclusive education*'. As the term indicates, the philosophy that guides this approach is that students with diverse needs (educational, physical, social and emotional) are placed together in age-appropriate classes/groups such that the students can optimally achieve their learning potential. The school makes suitable adjustments and modifications in its curriculum, teaching methods and physical set up to facilitate their education.

A person who chooses to become a special educator is said to have a career in Special Education. There are several models of special/inclusive education in which a special educator can work with children with SEN:

- (i) Some schools impart education exclusively to children with disabilities. Most such schools offer services to children with

specific disabilities, such as those with intellectual impairment, cerebral palsy or visual impairment. These fall in the category of special schools/programmes and require the services of special educators who are trained in working with children with those specific disabilities.

- (ii) **Inclusive Education** means including children with disabilities in regular classrooms. It is about all children learning together even if they differ from each other in style and pace of learning. It benefits all students and is an education for all. An inclusive school has within its premises, facilities for children with SEN. Here, all the students are placed in regular classes. In such a system, the special educators would not directly teach children with SEN, but provide pedagogical (instructional) support to the regular teachers.
- (iii) **Integrated Education** emphasises placement of children with disability in mainstream school. The school system remains rigid, as a result, very few children with disability are able to cope up with the demands of the school. There are many general schools which are inclusive. This means, the students with SEN are a part of the regular classes. The special educator then co-ordinates work with the regular teachers and provides extra inputs to the students in a Resource Room of the school.

For special and inclusive education to be effective, certain support services should be available to the children as well as to the educators and children's parents. These may be located within the school or in the community, accessible to the family. These are:

- i) Resource materials for students with SEN and educators
- ii) Transportation for students
- iii) Speech therapy
- iv) Physical and occupational therapy
- v) Counselling for children, parents and educators
- vi) Medical services.

In order to specialise in the fields listed from (iii) to (vi), higher education qualifications and training are to be acquired.

## BASIC CONCEPTS

In Part II of the Class XI HEFS textbook, in the chapter 'Care and Education' you had read that our school system is not quite equipped to provide

education to children with disabilities. One of the primary reasons is that during their training, the general education teachers may have not been oriented adequately to special methods that are required to work with students who have different kinds of needs. In an inclusive classroom, all teachers have to be sensitive to students with SEN. For example, when a child has intellectual disability, the educator must know how to break up the lesson into interesting and small units and to work slowly and patiently with the child. Slightly different skills are required to teach a child with deafness or one with blindness. While all teachers can acquire some of the skills, special educators receive specific training in such methods.

It must be quite clear by now that special education methods help children with disabilities acquire as much knowledge as they can so that their growth and development are supported to their full potential. The term '**disability**' has been used in the text several times so far. Let us discuss what we mean by disability and the different types of impairments that affect children's development.

*Disability:* According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 'disability' is an umbrella term that covers impairments, limitations in activity and restrictions in participation. Some children are born with a physical, sensory or mental impairment. Some others may develop a disability, as they grow, that substantially limits them in their daily life activities. In academic terms they are referred to as children with 'disability'. In the public domain they are sometimes referred to as being 'challenged' or 'differently abled'.

*Classification of disabilities:* Most of the disabilities can be classified under the following heads:

- i) Intellectual impairment (limitation in intellectual functioning and adaptive skills)
- ii) Visual impairment (includes low vision and total blindness)
- iii) Hearing impairment (includes partial hearing loss and deafness)
- iv) Cerebral Palsy (difficulties of movement, posture, speech and hand functions etc. due to brain damage)
- v) Autism (a disability affecting communication, social interaction and play behaviour)
- vi) Locomotor disability (difficulties in locomotion due to damage to bones, joints and muscles)
- vii) Learning disabilities (difficulties in reading, writing and arithmetic)

**ACTIVITY 2**

Divide the class into groups of 5-6 students. Discuss with one another in the group and make a list of the terms/words you have heard when referring to a child/adult who has a disability. Reflect and see if any of them have negative meanings.

*Causes of disabilities:* Briefly the causes can be grouped under three categories:

- i) Factors that affect before birth, both genetic and non-genetic,
- ii) Factors that affect the child at birth or soon after birth, and
- iii) Factors that impinge on the child during the development period.

**Special Education Methods**

There are specific methods and procedures in special education that enable the special educator to teach children with SEN systematically. A gist of these is given herein, in order of their implementation.

- i) First, an assessment of the child's/student's level in different areas of development and learning is undertaken. For example, in areas of cognitive development (e.g., concepts in maths), language development or social skills.
- ii) Based on the assessment report, an Individualised Education Programme (IEP) is developed for each student that is used to guide work with the student.
- iii) Regular evaluation of the IEP is undertaken to determine whether learning and development goals are being met, and to check the student's progress.
- iv) All along, access and use of support services (e.g., speech therapy, counselling) are facilitated, so that special education has the desirable effect on the student.

**KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

It is important for a person interested in following this profession to have an aptitude for it and the willingness to learn. Let us see what kind of knowledge and skills are required of personnel in special education.

*Understanding one's own beliefs and attitudes to disability:* Most of us 'construct' our beliefs about social phenomena, such as gender and social class, based on our own experiences as well as the beliefs of

others significant people who influence us, such as our parents. Hence, it is important to reflect and become aware how one views children with disability. Does one have a stereotyped view that they are less able and hence not qualified for equal rights? If we understand our own prejudices, it becomes easier to modify them and develop positive attitudes.

Training in special education helps in understanding children's needs, overcoming the prevailing myths and social stigmas related to their disabilities and developing positive attitudes towards them.

- (i) *Developing sensitivity:* If an overweight person is always referred to by others as 'fat', the remark would fall in the category of being insensitive, as he/she feels hurt. It labels him/her in an unfair manner. Special educators are expected to develop sensitivity towards children with disabilities. They can do this by using terms and language that convey respect for them as children first, working with them with the belief that they can learn and grow like all children and communicating hope to them and their parents. An attitude of disregard or mere sympathy and charity towards persons with disability conveys insensitivity and lack of respect for them.
- (ii) *Knowledge about disabilities:* Since the special educators' focus in their work is children with SEN, they must have a thorough knowledge about the nature of different disabilities, the developmental characteristics of children with these disabilities, and what associated difficulties or disorders may be present that need attention. For example, a child with cerebral palsy may also have some degree of intellectual impairment, and yet may be capable of doing many things.
- (iii) *Interpersonal skills:* People who are good communicators make effective special educators. However, with training, one can acquire communication skills as these would be required to work with children individually, as well as in groups. Quite often parents and other members of the child's family require guidance and counselling, where interpersonal skills would be very useful.
- (iv) *Pedagogical skills:* The special educator would be required to know the art and science of teaching students, termed *pedagogy*. This means to be able to teach a particular subject such as science, social science or maths. The educator must know how to break up and simplify the concepts and lessons so that the learners can grasp the principles as well as the meaning.

**ACTIVITY 3**

Check your level of sensitivity towards children with special needs:

Place a tick mark in one of the two columns.	Yes	No
1. When I see a child with blindness I feel I am lucky.	.....	.....
2. I stay away from students who seem to have a disability.	.....	.....
3. Children who are deaf cannot learn to communicate.	.....	.....
4. I like to know more about children with special needs.	.....	.....
5. SEN children should study with non-disabled students.	.....	.....
6. I am open to sitting in class with peers with SEN.	.....	.....

How have you fared?

A 'YES' to any of the statements 1, 2, 3 means you have to develop more sensitivity.

A 'YES' to the statements 4, 5, 6 means you are quite sensitive.

**Preparing for a Career in Special Education**

The need for special educators and other personnel in education programmes, both in special and inclusive education settings, has been increasing over time, more so after the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 1995 was passed. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has provision for eight years' of education for all children, including those with disabilities.

In view of the demand for such specialised personnel in large numbers, a career in Special Education appears to be attractive. In India, all forms of training for professionals and personnel who work in areas related to disability are regulated by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). This autonomous body facilitates special education training through several approved institutions throughout the country in packages of certificate,

diploma and degree level courses. Thus it is possible to be in the field of special education with different levels of training. Some of the current courses and pre-service trainings are:

- i) Certificate course in 'Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion' from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), which qualifies the candidate to be an early childhood special/inclusive educator. The minimum qualification for undertaking this course is Class X. Those with a higher qualification are also eligible.
- ii) Bachelor's degree in special education after any graduate degree qualifies a candidate to be an educator in a special/inclusive school. Such a degree is offered at conventional universities and education universities such as IGNOU, as well as by the National Institute for the Mentally Handicapped.
- iii) Those who have a Master's degree in fields such as Child Development, Human Development, Psychology or Social Work, can enter special education by doing any of the RCI recognised certificate, diploma or degree courses which may have an entry qualification lower than postgraduation. These provide recognition as special educators.
- iv) A Master's degree in Disability Studies prepares one for a larger role in the field of disability such as teaching at the university level, research, planning of programmes and setting up one's own organisation.
- v) Many departments of Child Development or Human Development, under the faculties of Home Science at various universities offer courses related to childhood disability. Postgraduate studies that include the study of children with disabilities in theory and practicum prepare the students quite adequately to work in educational institutions in various capacities.

## SCOPE

Depending upon which courses related to special education one studies, and up to what level one undertakes higher education, the field has immense potential. From becoming an early childhood special educator after Class X to being able to organise and conduct one's own enterprise are the possibilities. With a few years' experience, it is possible to be selected as head of special education programmes at schools, or manager of special schools. Non-governmental organisations that follow SSA guidelines too need qualified special educators and master trainers.

**KEY TERMS**

Special education, special educator, disability, exclusive education, inclusive education, sensitivity.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What do you understand by the term ‘special education’? Why is a teacher referred to as a ‘special educator’?
2. How will you explain the term ‘inclusive’ education’?
3. Describe the different models of Special and Inclusive education.
4. Name the support services that enable quality special education of children.
5. Define the term ‘disability’. How are childhood disabilities classified?
6. What type of knowledge and skills are required to be a special educator?
7. If someone needs guidance on entering the field of special education, what would be your advice?