

Social Work and Inclusive Education: Understanding the Role of Social Workers in Realizing the Educational Needs of Children with Disability

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Abstract:

In India, 1.05% of school-going children have a disability, of which 28% are those who have never been to an educational institution (census, 2011). Globally, a lot of efforts and advocacy has been done towards inclusive education for the mainstreaming of children with special needs. In India, every child between the age group of six to fourteen has a right to free and compulsory education, irrespective of any differences and biases. Different provisions have been created in the education policy of India and also in the Rights of the Persons with Disability Act to provide inclusive education to children with disabilities and fulfill their developmental needs. In this scenario, the role of social workers in the area of inclusive education is becoming quite essential. Social workers can work not only with children having special needs but also with their parents to resolve social, emotional and behavioural problems. They have an essential role in creating an association between school, home, and community to plan the best intervention for inclusive education. Therefore, the study aims to understand the different roles a social worker can play in the area of inclusive education for children with special needs. The study is based on the review of literature from varied sources of information, focusing on the role of social workers and the ways they can use their skills and knowledge base in practicing inclusive education for children with special needs."We need to get in there and do the work. We may do our work in a classroom, at a table, under a table, outside of a home on the front porch or through a screened door. We may do our work with puppets and clay or graffiti and spoken word, before school or during lunch...nonetheless, we do the work." - (Alden, 2012).

Introduction

Every child has a right of equal access to education, and when it comes to the children with special needs, this right becomes vulnerable, as the necessary support

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and services to ensure the right of education are not in place. Several legislations and acts have been enacted from time to time in India with respect to children with disabilities. These acts deal with the number of issues and the subsequent mechanism while working with children in need of special care. In India, 1.05% of school going children have a disability, of which 28% are those who have never been to an educational institution (Census, 2011). According to a report by World Bank, 2007, in India Children with special needs are five times more likely to be seen out of school than children belonging to schedule castes (SCs) or Schedule Tribes (STs) (Singal, 2009). Education is vital for the overall growth and development of children with disabilities, as it widens the panoramas and creates new opportunities for them in the society. Besides inclusive education of children having special needs can be of much significance to deal with the issue of marginalization and social exclusion which is very much prevalent in India (The World Bank, n.d.). The concept of special schools in the country to impart education to children with special needs were dominant till the 1970s until the scheme on Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) was introduced in 1974 with an aim to provide inclusive education to children with mild and moderate disabilities in regular mainstream schools. Then in 1986, came the National Policy on Education with a purpose to integrate children having mild disabilities in the mainstream educational institutions and the children with moderate to severe disabilities were to be placed in a special school. To fulfill the aim of inclusion and to further strengthen it, the Government of India came up with the Plan of Action in 1992 for the universal enrolment of children till the year 2000 and also providing education to children with special needs in regular mainstream schools. The plan of action proposed that the children after receiving the basic learning and training in non-curriculum areas in special schools should be mainstreamed in the regular school. The basic idea was that a child with special needs who can get the education from the mainstream educational institution should not be placed in a special school which was earlier allowed under the National Policy on Education. The next milestone was Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which was launched in the year 2001 to impart free and mandatory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years to achieve Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). There are different provisions for children with special needs under SSA, one among them is “zero rejection policy”, according to which no educational institution can deny enrolment to any children with special needs. Besides under SSA, resource centres are established in different districts across the country in order to provide all the possible support to children having special needs so as to bridge them into mainstream education.

In the year 2005, a National Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities was drafted by the Ministry of Human Resource

Development. Also, in 2008, the Inclusive Education of the Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) replaced the IEDC scheme of 1997. In 2009, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act as a Fundamental Right for all the children between the age group of 6-14 years. This has further strengthened the inclusive education of Children with Special Needs as, without their inclusion, the objective of UEE under SSA cannot be achieved. The Persons with Disability Act (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) came into force in 1995 to provide equal opportunities and full participation of individuals with Disability, thereby giving them their due rights. After 21 years the Rights of Person with Disability Act, 2016 was passed which covered a number of new dimensions in the area of disability. It focussed on providing inclusive education to children with special needs by directing certain duties towards the educational institution like enrolment of children without any bias, proper barrier-free infrastructure, early identification, teacher training, appropriate pedagogy, educational aids, individualized support and proper intervention etc. traditionally students were required to conform to the school environment and those who failed have to drop out but now due to the new laws and considering the rights of children, the schools have to create such environment so as to conform to the needs of children, so that to create a space where all children can receive education considering every child's diversity, differences, and special needs.

The evolving context of education and disability has brought forth the importance of school social workers. According to National Association of Social Workers, *"School social workers are an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success. They work directly with school administrations as well as students and families, providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and support services"*. School social workers goal is to help children make best possible use of their school experiences. These experiences should not just strengthen their academic outcomes but should lead to their overall development. The essence of inclusive education is only possible if all the support and facilities should be made available within the general mainstream education system. In this regard, the role of a social worker is of the utmost importance. Social work as a profession promotes equality, justice, change to empower the individuals for the general wellbeing of the whole society (Balli, 2016). School social work is a particular area of practice, wherein the professionally trained social workers assist the students with different needs and concerns like mental health concerns, behavioral concerns, positive behavioral support, academic and classroom support, counseling etc. A school social worker acts as a network between home, school, and community in providing direct and indirect social services to enhance the students' academic and social success

(School Social Work Association of America, n.d.). School social workers promote and facilitate inclusiveness in schools and to cater to the individual needs of children with disability. The main objective of school social workers is to assist the students and provide them with a suitable environment to optimize the learning process (Openshaw, 2008).

The roles and responsibilities of school social workers vary widely. Some of them work in the area of assessing special education eligibility for students with special needs, while some works in developing and implementing treatment and intervention plan for such children. To ensure inclusive education, a school social worker can work in different diversified areas like changing policies & procedures at the state and national level. Making use of various social work practices like casework, group work, and community-school models. Promoting inclusive education by using practice methods which involves peer tutoring, grouping special and general students together, team panning, student problem solving, partnership with teachers & parents etc. (Pryor, Kent, McGunn, &LeRoy, 1996).

***Aim:** The study aims to understand the different roles a social worker can play in the area of inclusive education for children with special needs. The study is review based and the data for the same is collected from secondary sources like journals, blogs, books, articles, research papers. The primary focus of the study is to gain an understanding about the role of social workers in the field of inclusive education for children with special needs.*

Ecological Systems Theory

Inclusive education cannot be just ensured by taking into account an educational institution and doing all the reforms within the institution only; rather it is a social concept that can be ensured only by understanding the relationship between different factors and systems influencing the child (Anderson, Boyle, & Deppeler, 2014). Bronfenbrenner is considered to be one of the pioneers of ecological system theory (Pryor, Kent, McGunn, &LeRoy, 1996). The theory focuses on the different influences on child development. The influences are the various relationships and interactions within and between the systems. The theory explains that the growth and development of a child are influenced by the interaction between the child's inherent qualities and his environment. The theory proposes five levels of external influences. The basic and the most immediate context of the child becomes the system of focus called the micro system. It mostly involves personal relationship and comprises of home, school, daycare, peer group etc. of a child. These micro systems are the subsystems of a more extensive system called mezzo-system. In a mezzo system, there is an interaction between different micro systems, e.g. home-school

collaboration. These mezzo systems are further nested within the most extensive system called macro system constituting people and places which although distant to the child but still influences the child in one or another way, e.g. socio-economic and political systems. Besides the above three systems, Bronfenbrenner came up with two other systems: exosystem and chronosystem. In Exo-system, there exist links between different social settings, in which the child neither have an active role, nor the child is directly part of it, but the presence of the setting does affect the child. E.g. a broader neighbourhood, parent's workplace etc. The chronosystem in simple terms demonstrates the changes that occurred over some time has an influence on the development of a child. E.g. change in family structure, parent's employment, war & conflict etc. (Wright, 2013).

Thus, the ecological systems theory provides an essential perspective regarding the role of a social worker in an inclusive education setting. It involves a holistic and integrated approach, wherein the social worker acts as an enabler and facilitator to meet the needs of children with disabilities by linking them with the essential resources. The role of a social worker in an inclusive education setting from ecological system perspective requires diverse knowledge regarding different aspects of children with special needs (Clark, 2007). Thus, this perspective enables us to understand the diverse roles a social worker can play towards inclusive education. At the micro-level, a school social worker can stimulate interactions between various systems like school & home. From Meso to Macro level, a social worker can work with groups, communities and can also use the social action approach to bring policy level changes. The goal is to serve children with special needs by improving the environment around them and stimulating interactions between different systems influencing children with special needs and their education.

Role of a Social Worker:

Since children devote a substantial part of their time in school, therefore the school environment should be as such where they can learn, grow and develop-academically, socially and emotionally. To ensure such an environment for all children, including children with special needs, social workers can play a vital role. In contemporary times, social worker's role is primarily directed to student's mental health needs, their need assessment and developing intervention plans for them to ensure special education services in an inclusive environment (Webber, 2018). Inclusive education demands to consider every aspect that can hamper or affect the child's education. It's not enough to think that building a barrier-free school with modern infrastructure is enough to call it an inclusive institution rather understanding individual differences is of utmost importance to inclusion research. School social workers function inside and outside the school, offering their services not just to the

school but also to families and communities (Mills, 2003). There comes into play the perspective of ecological system theory; which provides a useful theoretical framework to study children with special needs and the role of social workers to ensure inclusive education. As it takes into account different factors related to the child, which interact with each other to influence the inclusiveness in education (Kamenopoulou, 2016).

Professional social workers have the knowledge and skills required to work with children with special needs and to create collaboration between their home and school and also to involve the community in ensuring inclusive education practices. They provide evidence-based interventions for children and families (Meares, 1977) by doing the proper need assessment and linking them with adequate resources to reach the goal of inclusive education in society. The different roles of a social worker in ensuring inclusive education for children with special needs are:

Assessment:

One of the most vital roles of a social worker in ensuring inclusive education is needs assessment of children with special needs to plan an early intervention. Social workers facilitate the assessment process by creating linkages among different service providers and systems. They have been given the name of “mobile teachers” for their main role in assessing the child’s environment to facilitate their needs outside the classroom (Damyanov, 2010). To ensure inclusive education of children with special needs, a “needs assessment” of children is of utmost importance to create an environment to meet the diverse needs of children. It is a comprehensive process for developing intervention plans to meet the needs of children having disability (Balli, 2016). Needs assessment of a child by a social worker, require the inclusion of a variety of aspects influencing the child and his/her environment, and it should be carried out with a goal to benefit inclusion of children with special needs in general mainstream education (Mensah, & Badu-Shayar, 2016). The assessment by a social worker provide a basis for other professionals like counsellor, teacher, principal to contribute towards the development of programs and plans which are inclusive and child friendly (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2015). From an ecological perspective, a social worker’s role is to understand the child in his/her total environment, considering not only the child’s school environment for ensuring inclusive education but also the child’s family, peer groups, friends and neighbourhood. Besides to provide inclusive education, a social worker sees the child with special needs through the lens of strength’s perspectives, by discovering the child’s strong areas and using them accordingly to achieve their academic goals (Openshaw, 2008). Assessment of needs is done holistically by taking into account the different systems of which the child is a part directly or indirectly. Therefore, the

different roles a social worker can play in the assessment of various needs of a child include, obtaining information from teachers regarding the child's problem, obtaining information from parents regarding the child's behavior at home. Besides, gathering information regarding the family's socio-economic conditions like family setup, financial status, looking into the child's functioning and behavior with relatives, friends and in the neighborhood. In conceptualizing the problem of the child, the social worker has to work in diverse directions like providing direct services, consultations and developing intervention plans to properly link the resources with the needs of the child to ensure inclusive education in totality.

Home Visits& School home linkage:

Home visits is one of the key aspects of social worker. Practicing home visit comes with a lot of beneficial information which can provide basis for proper assessment of child's needs. Home visits use ecological perspective to enhance the understanding of home environment and its effect on his/her functioning (Pope&Hadden, n.d.). When working with children with special needs, home visits are considered quite useful. Social workers can practice home visits to facilitate inclusive education (Winter&Cree, 2017)by visiting the child's home and interacting with the parents/guardians to get an understanding of the child's environment outside the educational institution.To facilitate children with autism, learning disability or Attention- Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) social workers practice home visit in order to generate awareness among parents and siblings in understanding their roles and duties towards the special needs of children (Openshaw, 2008). Therefore, home visits by social workers are crucial to facilitate and ensure inclusive education of children with special needs.Research have shown the practice of home visits helps the social worker to create a link between school and family (Allen &Tracy, 2004). Many a times, despite having all the necessary support in school, the children still face barriers in learning, this can be due to various factors in their home environment. This can be recognised and addressed by the school social workers through home visits (McDavitt, 2017). Social workers visit the home of the students to ensure parent involvement, to respond to family diversity, student's behavioural assessment etc. (Openshaw, 2008;Allen&Tracy, 2004). Home visits by social workers are encouraged for developing effective plans which could be put in action both in school and home (Balli, 2016).

Besides home visit, it is important to facilitate and ensure school-home connectivity. Mostly, teachers are concerned with the educational needs of a child, and therefore there should be someone who can have direct dealing with parents and can create a link between home and school. Giving this role to teachers can overburden them and may also affect their teaching (McDavitt, 2017). Social workers can, therefore, play

an essential role by providing socio-educational consultation to help children with special needs. During the process of consultation, a variety of problems are revealed by child, parents, and teachers. It helps the social worker to assess different life situations influencing the child and thus subsequently plan an intervention to help the child achieve the desired goal. The process of consultation helps in ensuring inclusive education in the general education environment (Damyanov, 2017). The home-school collaboration and socio-educational discussion by a social worker reveal the special needs of a child along with his strengths, which further helps to plan and strategize the suitable inclusive educational environment catering the child's needs and maximizing his potential.

Mediation:

The role of mediation by a social worker in inclusive education is of much importance. According to Weiner, 1980, mediation helps in conflict resolution between child, parent, and school without using the formal appeal process (Openshaw, 2008). Mediation creates links between different systems that influence the child. The method of mediation is between the child and his/her social world, which includes parents, classmates, peers, friends, teachers etc. Mediation demands specialised knowledge and skills and can be done effectively by a professional social worker to ensure proper communication between home, school, and community to bring a positive change in the area of inclusive education (NASW,2012).

Mediation and social work have a common goal of empowering people based on the principle of impartiality, justness, and social well-being. A social worker using the tool of mediation looks for a common consensus and understanding to be created between systems influencing the child with special needs and his/her education (Carrasco, 2016). There is a need for the mediator having professional knowledge and skills in the social area, and social workers can act as the most viable professionals to perform this function (Vieira, 2013). Within the ambit of ecological theory, Mediation as a tool can be used to address issues of children with respect to the systems, they are living in. One of the ways in which mediation can be applied by social workers to ensure inclusive education is peer mediation. It involves educating peers of children with special needs to be accommodative and interactive to their counterparts. In this process social workers use role plays, modelling, clear instructions etc to generate awareness among peer groups of students with special needs. This helps in creating a peer group which act as social mediators in the educational institutes.

Using the set of knowledge and techniques, a professional social worker aims to facilitate communication and negotiation. Mediation within the social work profession can be used in a situation of difficulty and also in different institutions and

organizations, which are offering support to an individual with specific needs. In child inclusive practices, mediation is considered essential. The process of mediation allows not just the direct involvement of children but also the involvement of other significant others like parents, teachers & peers; with the sole aim to realise valuable role others can play to cater the needs of children with disabilities. The social workers acting as mediators are guided by the principle of neutrality, confidentiality, and impartiality. Social workers as mediators in conflict resolution can diagnose advice, guide, protect and assist the parties involved in offering inclusive education to a child with special needs. It can be used as a key to bring the change that values human condition (Vieira, 2013).

Counseling:

Studies have shown that children with special needs often face emotional and behavioural problems and they often face difficulties to adjust to the school environment. Besides research on school counselling have revealed that children feel more comfortable in sharing their concerns with someone other than their teacher, whom they don't have to face in the regular classroom (Burnison, as cited in Smith, 2018). Counselling plays an important role in helping such children and therefore comes the role of a social worker or a school counsellor. Counselling is taken as one of the vital duties of a school social worker. In ensuring inclusive education certain roles and functions of social workers and a school counsellor may overlap. Although the school counsellor may provide direct counselling to individual students like a school counsellor, the focus of a social worker is not just on the individual counselling but on the student's overall environment which includes his/her parents, friends etc. to bring a positive change in the student's academic, emotional and social well-being. Thus, practicing counselling and therapeutic approach to ensure inclusive education for children with special needs demands diverse work from a social worker. Diverse in-terms of providing Individual or group counselling, crisis intervention and family counselling (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Within an ecological view, counselling in schools has been proved beneficial to understand the students and their family (Smith, 2018). Social workers should practice counselling which is focussed and directed towards the child and the family. Social workers, with the help of counselling as a tool can assist children and their families to develop improved and varied ways related to learning, peer relationship and other school related issues. This will help in developing better self-esteem and coping among children. Counselling by social workers can help in dealing with adjustment and emotional issues of children with special needs to retain them in the institutions, which in turn would facilitate inclusive education in schools.

Advocacy:

Advocacy is a crucial element of social work as a profession (Dalrymple&Boylan, 2013). Working for an inclusive education requires a social worker to advocate for the rights of children to ensure that every child has equal access to educational resources and opportunities (NASW, 2012). According to Schneider and Lester, 2001, “*social work advocacy is the exclusive and mutual representation of clients or a cause in a forum attempting to systematically influence decision making in an unjust or unresponsive system*”

A social worker can do advocacy on behalf of either a single case, called case advocacy, for instance working for a child with special needs. Or the advocacy can be done on a larger platform, called cause advocacy, which involves policy or program change to bring social change and justice for a wider section of society (Dalrymple&Boylan, 2013). Under the framework of ecological systems theory, social work advocacy can be performed at different levels of the system. Advocating on behalf of a single case is called Micro level of advocacy, also known as case advocacy. Advocating at schools, community, & neighbourhood comes under the meso level of advocacy. Whereas, advocacy at state and centre government for policy change form the macro-level advocacy, for instance, lobby the department of education at the state level in bringing changes in policy to ensure inclusive education (Opperman, 2013). The role of a social worker is not just to create a link between different systems to meet the needs of the children but to advocate for their rights, reduce stigmatization and promote equality by providing them with their due space in the society (Kwan&Cheung, 2016).

Social workers thus act as a facilitator to bring the change that effectively caters to the needs of students, families, and school systems. They engage in the role of advocacy to ensure that every child’s right of getting an education should be fulfilled for their overall growth and development so that their dignity, capabilities, and potential must be realized to the fullest. The social worker must advocate for the services that should be available to the child (NASW, 2012) in order to meet their socio-educational needs in an inclusive setting.

Awareness Generation:

In a country like India, where the concept of inclusive education is still evolving, the role of a social worker in generating awareness about the rights of children and inclusive education plays an important role. According to Dr Pingle& Dr Garg, the lack of awareness among teachers and school authorities pose the biggest challenge to the inclusive education system in India. Social workers can generate awareness among parents and communities at grass root level about the constitutional provisions enacted for children with special needs. Awareness can help change people’s perception of children’s special needs. For awareness generation regarding

inclusive education, a social worker can work with teachers, student community, families and the neighbourhood community to make sure children with special needs must enter the school to enjoy their right to free and compulsory education. Social workers should prepare students to embrace human differences within and outside the school premises. The teachers should be given proper training regarding inclusive education and special education needs of children. They should be more patient towards the student with special needs (Kafia, 2014). The social workers should make awareness regarding the anti-discrimination legislation and consequences of not enrolling any student with special needs. The awareness should not focus only on the student's disability but overall child development (World Vision, 2012). Awareness regarding Individual educational plans and assessments to suit the student's individuality should be favoured to facilitate inclusive education practices.

The awareness generation among parents is of vital importance as many parents think that the child with a disability cannot get enrolment in school. Even if their children get admission in an educational institution, the parent's fear that the school environment will be unsafe for them and their children's special needs may not get fulfilled (World Vision, 2012). It is therefore important that a social worker working in the area of inclusive education must aware parents about the Rights of Children with Disabilities and how inclusive education can be beneficial in promoting social justice by combating stigmatization and prejudice.

Multi-disciplinary Team Work Approach:

A multidisciplinary teamwork approach is of utmost importance in ensuring inclusive education. It brings together professionals from different fields including, a school psychologist, social worker, health professional, teacher etc. to provide diverse services for children with special needs. Traditionally social workers have been working in coordination with professionals of other fields to better understand individuals and their problems (Kim, 2012). Multidisciplinary teams have been seen quite useful in schools also, and the role of social workers in such teams cannot be neglected.

A social worker contributes in many ways in multidisciplinary teams. Ecological systems theory best describes the role of a social worker in multidisciplinary teams. The social workers don't take just one aspect of an individual but instead takes the different systems influencing the individual in need. Under the ecological systems theory, social workers have a role in working in collaboration with other school staff and pursuing interventions at different system levels, to ensure inclusive education in totality. This helps in building the knowledge and understanding of various aspects from a variety of professionals in order to develop an appropriate intervention model while working in the area of inclusive education.

The primary role of a social worker in a multi-disciplinary team is building of initial trust and collaboration among different team members, to encourage the team members to work together in bringing the desired change to achieve the common goal (Kim, 2012). School social workers have an important contribution to make in the multidisciplinary teams. they assist the other team members in creating a link between home, school, and community (Balli, 2016); in early identification and early intervention of at-risk students or students with disabilities (NASW,2012 &Openshaw, 2008); in supporting teachers for developing individual education plans, and working with other systems to create a conducive environment for children with special needs (Balli, 2016).

Working in a multidisciplinary team helps in a proper delegation of work wherein roles are clearly defined, and the inputs from various teammates are gathered to decide and intervene effectively for students with special needs (Kim, 2012). In an interdisciplinary team, the social workers, along with the other professionals, work closely together to identify the early signs of difficulties and special needs of children. Social workers, in collaboration with other school staff can play an essential role in raising awareness regarding social oppression those children with disabilities face. For promoting inclusive education, the social workers, along with the other team members can work towards the acceptance of students with special needs not only in schools but in the community also. They can work in developing a healthy and friendly environment by working together with students, their families, teacher, community and other stakeholders, thereby ensuring inclusive education.

According to standard 10 of the National Association of Social Work, school social workers have to provide interdisciplinary leadership and collaboration by working with other school staff, parents and communities to promote student well-being and improve the academic outcomes (NASW, 2012).

Conclusion:

Social Work being a therapeutic and problem solving discipline emphasises on use of its core principles and values while working with children with disabilities and special needs. The concept of school social workers is not very famous in Indian context, but due to the reforms in educational system, the need to include social workers in the educational institutions to meet the needs of children with special needs has become quite essential. Inclusive education demands utilization of proper knowledge, skills and attitude so that a proper intervention can be framed to ensure educational needs of the children with special needs. A social worker working in the area of inclusive education must have the skills to work with the individuals, groups, families and communities. They have a role to play both inside and outside the school. The paper can serve as a guide towards highlighting the role, a social worker

can play in ensuring inclusive education for children with special needs. Inclusive education is only possible when the intervention is planned by keeping both the child and its environment into consideration. Under the ecological systems theory, a social worker plays an essential role by creating a link between different systems, a child is a part of and understanding the implications of these systems on the growth and development of a child, so that a proper intervention can be planned to ensure and realise the educational needs of that child. The paper is an attempt to relate social work profession with special educational needs of children, so as to highlight the different roles of a social worker in the area of inclusive education to promote the right of equal access to education by celebrating and embracing the differences and diversity among children.

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