

# **Nurturing Learning Environments: Addressing Challenges of Special Education Through Open and Distance Learning**

*Pallavi Gogoi*

## **1. Introduction: (Special Education)**

Special Education, also referred to as Special Needs Education, stems from the philosophy of inclusive education that addresses the special educational requirements of differently abled or rather specially abled learners, and focuses on creating conducive learning environments for them to achieve the fullest of their potential and to be nurtured through their holistic learning experiences. This necessitates the fact that special education must be practically designed and be participatory in nature in order to cater to the large spectrum of special requirements which differ from one special learner to the other. According to Kotwal's (2008) definition, "[s]pecial education is instruction that is modified or particularized for those students with special needs, such as learning differences, mental health problems, specific disabilities (physical or developmental), and giftedness."

In India long before, the government turned its attention towards inclusive education, the Christian missionaries had a considerable role in reaching out to those with special needs across different strata of the society. In due course of time, the Government of India introduced various Acts such as the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992; Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995; and National Trust Act, 1995 with a focus on implementing policies that ensure equal and inclusive development of the differently or specially-abled in the larger society.

Special Education calls for a comprehensive knowledge and insight into the pedagogical methods and practices that are best suited to meet the specific requirements of learners with special needs. While special education focuses on creating conducive learning environments, it also facilitates both the holistic development and overall well-being of special learners with special whether it concerns their various personal, physical, emotional, psychological, social, behavioral or other relevant aspects. In this regard, James E. Ysseldyke et al. (2007) rightly opines that special education is at the intersections or better still at the "...

crossroads in development.” Peter Westwood in a broad discussion on the relevance of special education notes that the OECD (2007) had suggested three common categories to define special learners across several countries thus,

- Students with identifiable disabilities and impairments;
- Students with behavioral and/or emotional disorders, or with specific difficulties in learning;
- Students with difficulties arising from socio-economic, cultural, or linguistic disadvantage.”

## **2. Learning Difficulties:**

Special learners may confront learning difficulties that can range from minimal to severe disabilities such as varied physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, emotional disabilities, behavioural disabilities, attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders. Significantly, Reddy et al. (2014) note that a form of ‘disability’ is not necessarily a ‘handicap’ and vice versa which explains the difference between the two terms as the following: “[a] disability is an inability to do something. It is a diminished capacity to perform in a specific way. A handicap, on the other hand is a disadvantage imposed on an individual.”

While differently abled learners may find themselves struggling with various types of learning disabilities, there are many gifted or rather specially abled learners who do not suffer from any learning disability at all. In fact, such learners tend to be highly intelligent and gifted with higher orders of learning reflected through both their curricular, as well as, co-curricular activities. However, their gifted potential has to be tapped and nurtured at the right time and they have to be constantly motivated with ample learning opportunities so that they can grow individually and also strive for excellence in the field of higher education as well.

## **3. Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) and Therapy:**

Teachers and special educators must be cognizant of the special learners’ abilities and disabilities, strengths and weaknesses, learning pace and outcomes, reception and performance, challenges and special requirements. They must work towards inculcating the best practices, applying special teaching methodologies and nurturing healthy learning

environments as it can go a long way in shaping the life experiences, learning experiences as well as, the professional life of special learners. In this regard, Gifted Education also referred to as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) plays a special role in identifying and nurturing special learners who are uniquely gifted or talented. It emphasises timely intervention, expertise in working with gifted learners, as well as, learner friendly approaches that draws such learners out of their shell thereby enabling them to realise their potential to the fullest. Thus, Reddy et al (2014) rightly opine, “[g]iftedness, then, is a result of combined biological and environmental influences- nature and nurture.” (23).

Furthermore, in order to induce a positive, creative and a fulfilling learning environment, both educators and parents or guardians must be well informed of the various forms of therapies that may be beneficial for special learners such as ‘speech and language therapy’ performed by therapists that focuses on problems of speech, syntax, reception, expression, stammering and a range of other such language and communication factors. Similarly, ‘occupational therapy’ enables special learners to take active part in all their learning, as well as, their social environments; ‘adaptive physical therapy’ performed by physical therapists enhance physical healing and improvement therapies; and ‘rehabilitative counseling’ performed by rehabilitation counsellors takes special care of their development and wellbeing through modes of counselling sessions. Also, there are newer psychometric tests and other individual intelligent quotient tests that readily assess and identify the potential of differently or specially-abled learners in order to cater to their special needs in a better way. Moreover, the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) had introduced an Awareness-cum-Training Package for the guardians of special learners in collaboration with Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

#### **4. National Policy for the Differently Abled:**

Here, it may be mentioned that the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, mentions that in India as per the Census 2001, there are 2.19 crore persons with disabilities and almost fifty percent of this section have no means to education even as the Constitution of India guarantees the inclusive right to education (Annexure, Agarwal and Rao, 164). As per the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2016 passed by Parliament, a total of twenty one such types of disabilities

are mentioned namely: speech and language disability, blindness, low vision, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, intellectual disability, specific learning disability, mental illness, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, chronic neurological conditions, multiple sclerosis, multiple disabilities including deaf blindness, dwarfism, leprosy cured persons, thalassemia, haemophilia, sickle cell disease, parkinsons disease and acid attack victims (source: Live law). Although differently-abled or specially-abled learners are conveniently categorised and differentiated (often in insensitive ways) as disabled or handicapped, yet they are special and deserve special nurturing.

## **5. Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

The Open and Distance mode of education provides a fresh opportunity and a fair chance to those gifted learners who may have lost out on the opportunities of continuing higher education in the regular mode of education for many different reasons. Distance education is much liberal in its modern and all-inclusive approach, as it plays a significant role in empowering all its learners towards achieving their best potential and in taking into account their unaddressed problems that act as barriers of learning, thereby, guiding them towards newer directions. Therefore, with the broad aim of democratising i.e., providing equal opportunities of higher education to all and towards adding to the larger pool of human resources of the nation, Distance Education has played a major role in the educational scenario of India.

To briefly cite the history of Open and Distance Education, in its initial stages – Distance Education saw the introduction of the dual mode of education by the University of Delhi through the School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education (SCCCE) in the year 1962 based on the recommendation of the Expert Committee constituted by the Union Ministry of Education and chaired by D.S. Kothari. However, Distance Education imparted through the portals of Open Universities took two long decades to begin with the establishment of first ever Open University –Andhra Pradesh Open University (renamed as B. R. Ambedkar Open University) in the year 1982 which was closely followed by the establishment of Indira Gandhi National University in the year 1985. Today, there are a total of 106 dual mode universities and 12 open universities in India, apart from the distance programmes offered by private universities.

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system is a flexible, cost-effective and learner friendly system which offers relevant and quality learning opportunities to all those who are interested in learning at one's own pace and convenience, as well as, those who do not have an access to higher education for one reason or other. This alternative mode of education, today is considered as "a powerful instrument of equalization of educational opportunities" (Srivastava,125) and hence, the Open Universities (OUs) play a versatile role in imparting higher education through the distance mode of education. While the conventional mode of education has traversed a long journey of more than 150 years of its growth and establishment in India, the non-conventional or distance mode of education has seen just around four decades. Nevertheless, Distance Education in India continues in its educational endeavours, achieving several milestones and progressing in its journey ahead.

Significantly, ODL in India continues to bring about a major shift in addressing the 'special educational needs' of special learners that encompasses various individual and social, psychological and emotional, physical and cognitive aspects among others. Creating a supportive environment through ODL and reaching out to the differently abled learners rather than remaining confined to the apparent limitations or challenges of the ODL system is the need of the hour. In this light, the paper aims to highlight some of the ways in which the ODL system can take up the challenges of special education for differently or specially abled learners. The paper is a descriptive study and is an attempt to provide an insight into the various types of learning abilities and disabilities, to look into the instructional needs of such learners and to facilitate both the learning and lifelong learning experiences for learners in the ODL.

## **6. Role of Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and National Institutes:**

One of the significant special institutes for the differently abled is the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which was established as a registered body in 1986 by the Government of India that turned into a statutory body on 22 June 1993 followed by the enactment of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) Act, 1992. The RCI Act was amended in the year 2000 to incorporate significant features with regard to persons with disabilities (PWDs) as is the common term used, and special learners. RCI approved institutions offers academic programmes

and recognises courses both for the regular and the distance mode. The objectives of RCI are outlined as follows:

- To regulate the training policies and programmes in the field of rehabilitation of persons with disabilities
- To prescribe minimum standards of education and training for various categories of professionals dealing with persons with disabilities.
- To regulate these standards in all training institutions to bring about uniformity throughout the country
- To recognise/derecognise institutions and courses in the field of rehabilitation of the disabled
- To recognise foreign degrees/diplomas/certificates
- To maintain Central Rehabilitation Register of persons possessing recognised qualifications
- To encourage continuing rehabilitation education
- To promote research in rehabilitation and special education. (Reddy et al, 2014; RCI website)

With special regard to higher education, a range of RCI approved courses are offered through the regular mode in the specialised areas of visual impairment, hearing impairment, learning disability, community based rehabilitation, field of rehabilitation psychology, clinical psychology, field of speech and hearing, locomotor and cerebral palsy, autism spectrum and disorder, rehabilitative therapy, vocational counselling and rehabilitation social work/administration, course for caregivers and the field of inclusive education for Graduate, Post graduate, PG. Diploma, Diploma, Advance Diploma, Professional Diploma, Certificate Courses and M. Phil programmes (varying from programme-to-programme).

In the case of distance mode, it is noted that most of the State Open Universities (SOUs) of India currently provide RCI approved courses in the field of inclusive and special education. Perhaps, with time 'newer courses' may be introduced in view of its significance towards creating educated and trained human resources among special learners, as well as, those working as special educators or trainers in the field. Moreover, 'imparting vocational training' and 'certificate courses' for special learners through the distance mode of learning shall be highly advantageous for those who desire to pursue the same.

In India, there are a total of seven national institutes that are actively involved in developing human resources among the differently or specially-abled that are namely: National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities, Chennai; National Institute for Rehabilitation Training and Research, Cuttack; Institute for the Physically Handicapped, New Delhi; Institute for Orthopedically Handicapped, Kolkata, National Institute for Visually Handicapped, Dehradun; National Institute for Hearing Handicapped, Mumbai; and National Institute for Mentally Handicapped, Secunderabad.

Also, it may be noted that there are several audio-book production centres in India namely: National Association for the Blind, Mumbai; National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, Dehradun; Central Library, University of Delhi, Delhi; Electronic Media Production Centre, IGNOU, New Delhi; All India Confederation of the Blind, Delhi; and Helen Keller Service Society for the Disabled, Tamil Nadu among others. Also, some of the Braille Presses in India are namely: The Regional Braille Press, Ramakrishna Mission, West Bengal; All India Confederation of the Blind, Delhi; Government Institute of the Blind, Punjab; National Association for the Blind, Mumbai; Blind People Association, Ahmedabad; Central Braille Press, Red Cross School for the Blind, Berhampur; National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, Dehradun among a few others.

## **7. Meeting Special Educational Needs Through ODL:**

As an 'alternative' or even 'unconventional' system of education, the responsibilities of academicians and educators in the distance mode increases manifold. An educator in the distance mode of teaching is entrusted with the responsibility of valuing every single learner while also being accountable to them as well. They are to constantly motivate their learners and supplement the teaching-learning-counselling process through an innovative range of learner support services and more. One of the most challenging aspects of higher education through the distance mode of education is to create a holistic and nurturing environment for its special learners in its high commitment towards inclusive education.

In the ODL system, the 'Learners' Support Services' (LSS) comprises multimedia learning (that supplements printed materials), audio materials, audio-video materials, ICT-based support systems, e-learning portals teleconferencing, mobile applications, video-conferencing, radio etc. that facilitate the learning experiences of distance learners.

Although these multiple learning modes are well in place, there is a need to quantitatively assess and identify the extent to which these services effectively reach and are received by the special learners in the distance mode of education. It is necessary to ensure lucid, learner-friendly and well-designed LSS that take into account their specific needs which also indicates the importance of a constant quality assessment and strict implementation in this regard.

In the Open and Distance Learning, one of the common difficulties among learners with special requirements is to constantly remain 'motivated' in the absence of a regular teacher. Such learners may confront a range of learning difficulties and also face various hurdles in their learning pursuits. Thus, it is necessary to engage or employ trained and professional 'counsellors' and/or 'teachers' trained in special education or counselling who can effectively address the problems and challenges faced by special learners in the distance mode of education. If we take into consideration Abraham Harold Maslow's (1948) theory on the order or hierarchy of needs and Frederick Herzberg's (1966) theory of motivation, we gain a fair idea of the wired 'needs' of learners and the way these can be met with caring and careful precision ensuring the holistic development and well-being of our specially-abled learners.

Thus, it is highly important to 'assess' the special needs, abilities and performance of special learners in the distance mode and chalk out a direct mode of 'continuous evaluation' (term or semester wise) by academic or subject experts of ODL institutions while also ensuring that they are provided with relevant Self Learning Materials (SLMs), guidance manuals, Braille texts, Braille writing equipments, tape recorders, hearing aids and educational kits among other necessary requirements to facilitate their learning experience. Pattnaik (2010) suggests the importance of "[e]ffective treatment" comprising "multi-modal" and suitable "tailored teaching and compensatory strategies/tools" some of which includes alternative assignments, modified methods of testing, electronic spellers and dictionaries, audio books, word processors, talking calculators, text-to-speech (TTS) softwares, and note-takers among other effective tools (201). Therefore, the first and foremost challenge is to ensure that the basic academic support, as well as, the LSS of ODL institutes are effectively met and delivered to the special learners. Moreover, scholarships and awards for special learners of ODL institutes can also be a means of great encouragement and support as well. 'Outreach services' with regard to suitable or supportive therapies

(as discussed earlier) can also be conducted from time-to-time through the ODL institutions.

ICT plays an extensive role as a source of information, networking, as well as, interaction and it serves as a great advantage for the distance mode of education although it must be ensured that its benefits are received by the special learners. As suggested by Bernath and Rubin (2006) various online platforms of discussion such as the comprehensive Virtual Seminars are designed for “participation from anywhere” by subject experts who motivate participants towards fruitful interactions and wider knowledge-building through the worldwide web with a designed syllabi well in place (216). Such initiatives can also be adopted by the ODL institutions in our country as well, focusing on the requirements of special learners, counting on the pool of special educators and academic experts thereby ‘networking’ them altogether. With the ever-evolving nature of the ICT, it is possible that more such innovative, user-friendly and knowledge-building platforms will be created addressing the requirements of the specially abled learners. Here, one may take into consideration Fred Lockwood’s discussion on creating and assessing innovative learning systems and technologies, where he mentions an apt acronym of Bates’ (1995) referred to as the ACTIONS model thus,

“Access: how accessible is a particular technology for learners?

Costs: what is the cost structure of each technology?

Teaching functions: what are the best teaching applications for technology?

Interacting and user friendliness: how easy is it to use?

Organizational Issues: what changes in organizations need to be made?

Novelty: how new is this technology?

Speed: how quickly can courses be mounted with this technology?”

(*Innovation in Open and Distance Learning* 2006: 11)

Also, fruitful qualitative and quantitative ‘research’ must be taken up through the distance learning mode in the field of rehabilitation and special education. ODL institutions can play a contributing role in the area of research and acquiring vital statistics concerning a range of variables such as education, employment, demography and other

relevant aspects with regard to the specially abled in the society. Further, Reddy et al. (2014) in their discussion of special educational needs cite Hallahan and Kauffman (1991) who suggest the importance of 'special educators' acquiring expertise in imparting special education, applying strategies of behavioural management, effectively using ICT, as well as, being well conversant with special education law (5) while working with special children which can precisely be extended to all teachers and academicians working with special learners and nurturing positive learning environments.

Also, James E. Ysseldyke et al (2007) suggest the importance of implementing 'changes in academic curricula' through the identification of its 'outcomes' in order to develop and enhance the same. Further, Westwood highlights the importance of 'metacognition' or Cognitive Behaviour Modification (CBM) for 'constant self-motivation' and the skills of 'self-management' imparted to learners with special needs in order to guide them towards independent learning and conscious adaptation "to any given learning environment" (68). This could be an example of how inclusive and innovative strategies may be applied to the existent academic curricula for differently abled learners in the ODL system as well.

Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the importance of determining specific strategies, developing effective instructional modes, assessing academic curricula, providing proper guidance and counselling and emphasising on vocational training of differently or specially abled youth, in order to both enhance and enrich their learning experiences and broaden the possibilities of their holistic development. Furthermore, taking into consideration the progress and well-being of differently and specially abled learners, 'lifelong learning' holds the promise of a more rewarding and fulfilling experience.

---

### **References:**

- Agarwal, Rashmi and B.V.L.N Rao. (2007). *Education for Disabled Children*. New Delhi: Shipra Publications.
- Garg, Suresh, V. Venkiah, Chambi Puranik and Santosh Panda. (Eds.) (2010). *Four Decades of Distance Education in India: Reflections in Policy and Practice*. New Delhi: Viva Books.
- Kotwal, Parijit. (2008). *Special Education*. Delhi: Authorspress.
- Lockwood, Fred and Anne Gooley. (2006). *Innovation in Open and Distance Learning*. London: Routledge, Kogan Page.

Pattnaik, S.N. (ed). (2010). *Special Education: Policies, Practices and Social Issues*. New Delhi: Murari Lal and Sons.

Reddy, Lokananda G., R. Ramu and A. Kusuma. (2014). *Education of Children with Special Needs*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.

Srivastava, Manjulika. (2012). *Open Universities: India's Answer to Challenges in Higher Education*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Westwood, Peter. (2014). *Commonsense Methods*. (Sixth Edition). London: Routledge.

Ysseldyke, James E., Bob Algozzine and Martha Thurlow. (2007). *Critical Issues in Special Education*. (Second Edition) New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.

**Web Resources:**

Rehabilitation Council of India  
<http://www.rehabcouncil.nic.in> [Accessed on 06.11.17.]

"Salient Features of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Bill" By: Livelaw New Network, 3 December 2016.  
[www.livelaw.in>salient-features-persons-with-disabilities](http://www.livelaw.in/salient-features-persons-with-disabilities). [Accessed on 07.11.17.]