

Chapter 7

Holistic Approach as a Strategy for Special Education in India

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ABSTRACT

Overcoming socio-cultural pressures in India with reference to special education will render intervention and remedial practices effective especially with a holistic approach which includes regional adaptations and multidisciplinary approaches to create a suitable framework within the Indian context for successful special education assessment with particular concern for hidden disabilities like learning disabilities which require and benefit from a holistic approach. Tracing a path through analysis of the Indian philosophical perspectives in education to possible current applications in educational practice this chapter provides a sound basis for adopting the holistic approach in education at a macro level and bringing about change in assessment practices at the micro level.

INTRODUCTION

In India, a host of circumstances surround every situation. When a child is found to be lagging in multiple skill areas, a process of denial, protecting the child from society as well as declining appropriate professional help to the child creates a trickle-down effect through the years resulting in uneven development in the child. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) aims to provide inclusive education in all schools, macro-level cultural factors like language barriers and economic barriers have affected the efficacy of this aim and at a micro level pedagogical practices within classrooms, remain resistant to change, again due to cultural specificities. Special education at the heart of its intention seeks to ease the child through the process of inclusion to a life within a normal environment as opposed to segregating and grouping children. Much has been accomplished in the last two decades in India, but hidden disabilities like learning disabilities are yet to see the light of day in terms of adequate awareness, early diagnosis, and early intervention. The scenario is additionally complicated by economic disadvantages and cultural pressures. The multilingual Indian context further exacerbates the situation. Hidden disabilities like Specific Learning Disability (SLD), comprise a

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heterogeneous group of disorders with the main impairment being cognitive processing, which leads to challenges in academic performance and has psychosocial implications. Impairment should be present in history, school reports, and psychological assessment and persistence for at least six months as per Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th version (DSM-5) criteria by American Psychiatric Association (2013). From research by Chacko & Vidhukumar (2020), it is known that the prevalence of learning disabilities among primary school children in India is 11.2% for dyslexia, 12.5% for dysgraphia, and 10.5% for dyscalculia. In the current scenario, the approach of schools is to refer only children who are noticeably struggling with formal assessment which would be at the high school level, and extend available provisions like exemption of second language. The children struggling at the primary level are left languishing till their difficulties are so great that the delayed intervention they receive is often too little too late and they end up dropping out of school and shifting to special schools. A major goal of inclusive education led to the development of an early warning identification system by UNICEF (2017) which looks at the environmental circle as well as behavioral patterns of the child within a wider social context. Today, inclusion has thus been added to the preschool curriculum at Anganwadi centers in the hope of promoting early identification and providing holistic development. All along there have been recommendations to adopt a holistic approach in early childhood development. A holistic approach has been described as taking into consideration all facets of the development of a child including physical, emotional, economic, and intellectual. It allows the child to develop uniquely, focusing on individual strengths without the constraints of the traditional classroom which is norm based and competitive. It is relevant to consider the holistic approach as a valuable approach toward inclusion. Both keep the child's interests at its core. In special education, the holistic approach is relevant from two aspects, assessment as well as intervention. Holistic education aims to equip children to face challenges in life in a healthy manner.

INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

The holistic approach to education is rooted in Indian philosophy. Rabindranath Tagore's ideals for education were based on the individual's innate capabilities (Andrews, 1938). He believed children should feel free to be inventive so their creativity could develop (Tagore, 1931). His worldwide travel on educational missions contributed greatly to educational reforms in India (Lal, 1984). His ideas on education encompassed learning amidst nature, aligning one's skills in harmony with one's surroundings and thus bringing out the best in each child. Roy (2021) has shown the benefits of holistic teaching and learning as seen among children educated according to the principles laid out by Tagore in Shantiniketan. His was a combination of East and West keeping the good of the child as of utmost importance, inculcating education as well as nurturing the goodness within. The essence of his approach was that nature and arts could put one in harmony with the universe. He felt freedom in the mind facilitated the exercise of mental faculties, he viewed education as a vehicle to appreciate others' cultural differences (O'Connell, 2010). If children were rooted firmly in their cultural identity, they would find it easy to relate to other cultures. Similarly, if they were confident in themselves, they would blossom in their creativity and individual strengths. His main ideology was that education should aim to develop harmony within one's self as well as with the outer world. It was a journey of self-realization (Goswamee & Saikia, 2017). His idea of consolidation of cultures is particularly relevant in present times with regard to the Right to Education Act, of 2009 which makes education

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