

Towards Full Inclusivity: Essentialising the Integration of Sign Language as Skill Subject within the CBSE School Curriculum

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Abstract: With the UN's SDG Goal #4 of Quality Education, and inclusive education being a necessary, albeit rampant movement in the educational arena, it is essential to make inclusive education a normalcy in all educational institutions.

Whilst inclusivity is implemented through unbiased admissions, individual attention given by faculty, access to resources, etc., the paper proposes that disability-associated languages and communication modes (in this case, sign language) be included as skill subject for both hearing and hearing-impaired students. The imperativeness, methods, benefits, challenges and solutions of integrating sign language into the CBSE curriculum are thus elaborated upon.

Keywords: 1. CWSN 2. Education 3. Educational Policy 4. Inclusivity 5. Sign Language

Introduction

Inclusive Education (IE) is about our collective responsibility for humanity (Ackah-Jnr, 2020). Academically speaking, the purpose of inclusive education is to create an educational environment wherein no pupil is excluded on the basis of his or her disabilities. The purpose is to broaden and magnify learning and participation in educational institutes whilst simultaneously reducing any barricades between the educator and pupil.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948) was the first to voice the issue of human rights for inclusive education. To illustrate, Article 26 of the UDHR states, "everyone has the right to education for the full development of their potential". (United Nations, 1948)

The UNICEF aptly states, "Inclusive education means: all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools." Inclusive education values the unique contribution of students bring to the classroom regardless of backgrounds whilst providing real learning opportunities to those who traditionally have been excluded, and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all. (UNICEF, 2022)

As an international best policy, practice and provision, inclusive education has a universally-accepted ideal definition but lacks practicality, and this has implications for schools and teachers especially that implement education policies Ackah-Jnr (2020).

Towards Full Inclusion

According to UNESCO (2013), inclusive education is a process that addresses the diverse needs of all learners by enhancing participation in education and reducing exclusion (Slee, 2018; Tiernan, 2022). However, Slee and Tiernan critique this definition for lacking a clear theoretical focus, which affects its implementation.

Tiernan (2022) notes a growing recognition that inclusive education must move beyond deficit-based perspectives (Cologon and Thomas, 2014) and embrace the complexity of human diversity (Cologon, 2019). To achieve true inclusivity, ableism must be confronted—this refers to societal beliefs that prioritize certain abilities over others (Hehir, 2002).

Ableism involves discrimination against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. Tiernan highlights Florian's (2019) view that education systems must not marginalize learners through predetermined categorizations. This calls for a fundamental reevaluation of how students are identified and supported, emphasizing diversity as central to inclusive education.

Inclusion typically refers to meeting the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream settings, with separate placements considered when necessary (Hornby, 2015). However, this can lead to inequalities within the educational system.

In contrast, full inclusion means integrating all students, including those with complex needs, into mainstream education (Kanter, Damiani, and Ferri, 2014). Proponents argue that segregated settings perpetuate exclusion and undermine the goal of an inclusive education system (Ferguson, 2008).

Advocates for full inclusion assert that it dismantles ableism by centering diversity in education. This approach ensures that all students have access to suitable educational methods and promotes a more inclusive learning environment where students with disabilities can actively engage alongside their peers.

The CBSE on Inclusivity

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has recognised the importance of inclusiveness in education and has developed guidelines to promote inclusive practices in schools. The CBSE's Handbook of Inclusive Education (CBSE, 2023) emphasises the provision of quality education to all students, including those with disabilities. It further highlights the importance of promoting the use of sign language as a means of communication for students with hearing impairments.

Additionally, the Handbook outlines the specific accommodations and support that schools should provide to ensure a conducive learning environment for all students, in accordance with the principles of inclusiveness. Incorporating these guidelines can significantly contribute to creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment for students with diverse needs.

The New Education Policy on Inclusivity

The New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) also places a strong emphasis on inclusive education, aiming to provide equal opportunities for all students. The policy encourages schools to adopt a multi-faceted approach to accommodate the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities. In line with this, educators are encouraged to familiarise themselves with sign language and integrate it into their teaching methods to ensure effective communication with students who are deaf or hard of hearing (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

The MHRD further stress that the promotion of sign language as a part of the curriculum can foster a more inclusive environment and facilitate the seamless integration of students with hearing impairments into the mainstream educational system. Additionally, the utilisation of assistive technologies and other accommodations recommended by the New Education Policy 2020 further supports the goal of creating an inclusive learning environment for all students. By implementing these guidelines, schools can not only meet the educational needs of students with disabilities but also promote a culture of empathy, understanding, and acceptance within the school community.

Integration of Sign Language as a Skill Subject

In recent years there has been a significant debate regarding the ways in which different educational systems throughout the world could develop more inclusive practices in their schools. One such method is the integration of sign language into the school curriculum. This would prove particularly important for students with hearing impairments.

Sign language is manual communication generally used by people who are deaf. The gestures or symbols in sign language are organised in a linguistic way, and each individual gesture is called a sign (University of Washington, n.d.).

By teaching sign language as a skill subject, schools can ensure that students with hearing impairments have access to a language that enables effective communication. Moreover, integrating disability-associated languages and communication modes can help students with disabilities develop crucial language and communication skills that are essential for their educational and social development (Boyle and Kennedy, 2019).

It is essential for schools and educationists to implement effective pedagogy that benefits students with learning disabilities by integrating disability-associated languages and communication modes into the curriculum (Astuti and Sudrajat, 2020). This integration should not be seen as a confining measure, but rather as an empowering one that provides students with disabilities the tools they need to succeed academically and socially (Boyle and Kennedy, 2019).

Why as a Skill Subject?

Skill subjects, like sign language, provide students with practical, real-world abilities that improve their problem-solving, social interaction, and cultural awareness, preparing them for a more diverse and connected society

In contrast, treating sign language as a secondary language may over-emphasise linguistic complexity, detracting from practical communication goals, and/ or create unrealistic expectations for fluency, potentially discouraging students.

Introducing Sign in Schools

Integrating sign language as a skill subject in school curricula is a valuable step toward promoting inclusivity and linguistic diversity (Kluwin and Stinson, 1993). Effective implementation involves several key strategies:

1. **Develop a Comprehensive Curriculum:** Collaborate with Deaf community members and sign language experts to create a robust program that aligns with national educational standards (Hartman, Smolen and Powell, 2023). Sign language should be treated as a formal language, similar to foreign languages, with clear learning objectives and assessments.
2. **Train Teachers:** Providing educators with sign language training and resources is crucial for fostering an inclusive classroom environment (Humphries et al., 2012; Padden and Humphries, 2005). Teacher training programs should include sign language pedagogy and insights into Deaf culture, ensuring instructors can effectively engage with Deaf students.
3. **Start with Basics:** Introduce fundamental signs, finger spelling, and grammar at the primary education level, progressively building towards advanced proficiency in secondary education (Vicars, 2012; Napier and Leeson, 2016).
4. **Incorporate Deaf Culture:** Educate students about Deaf history, community, and experiences to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Deaf culture (Lane et al., 2011).

5. **Encourage Immersion:** Facilitate immersion experiences by inviting Deaf guests, attending sign language events, and participating in community service, enhancing real-world exposure (Kluwin and Stinson, 1993).

A Blessing for Students...

1. **Mental and Intellectual Benefits:** Learning foreign languages, including sign language, enhances personal and professional growth by improving cognitive abilities and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Research shows that bilingualism strengthens problem-solving and multitasking skills (Bialystok, 2009; 2011). Cognitively, learning sign language enhances memory, spatial reasoning, and visual processing (Emmorey, 2001).
2. **Communication Benefits:** Mastering sign language improves overall communication skills, including the ability to read facial expressions and body language. Skills. Individuals can bridge communication gaps, fostering relationships and enhancing social interactions (Humphries et al., 2012; Napier and Leeson, 2016).
3. **Social Benefits:** Learning sign language specifically aids in promoting inclusivity and communication with the deaf and hard-of-hearing community (Mitchell et al., 2006). Additionally, it promotes empathy and intercultural competence, essential for building meaningful relationships across different cultures (Byram, 1997). This understanding encourages inclusivity and accessibility in educational and professional contexts)
4. **Career Benefits:** Professionally, sign language opens up career opportunities in fields such as education, healthcare, and social work, where communication with Deaf individuals is vital (Lane et al., 2011). As the demand for sign language interpreters and professionals proficient in sign language grows, students equipped with these skills can access diverse job prospects (Napier and Leeson, 2016).

...and a Boon for Faculty

Learning sign language offers numerous advantages for faculty, enhancing their teaching, research, and community engagement (Kluwin and Stinson, 1993). Key benefits include:

1. **Enhanced Teaching:** Faculty can improve communication with Deaf students, creating more effective and inclusive learning experiences. Proficiency in sign language facilitates better support for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, ensuring equal access to education and reducing communication barriers in the classroom.

2. **Increased Accessibility:** Learning sign language helps create inclusive learning environments that comply with disability regulations (Lane *et al.*, 2011). This commitment to accessibility promotes educational equity and fosters a diverse classroom atmosphere.
3. **Research Opportunities:** Faculty can explore areas such as sign language linguistics, Deaf culture, and education, leading to interdisciplinary research and collaboration (Emmorey, 2001). This engagement with Deaf studies enhances academic knowledge and scholarship.
4. **Community Engagement:** Proficiency in sign language allows faculty to collaborate with Deaf organisations, promoting social and cultural exchange (Humphries *et al.*, 2012). This involvement strengthens ties between educational institutions and the Deaf community.
5. **Professional Development:** Learning sign language enhances faculty career prospects and versatility, enriching teaching methods and contributing to professional growth (Kluwin and Stinson, 1993; Napier and Leeson, 2016). Faculty who are adept in sign language can serve as role models for students, promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity.
6. **Mentorship and Advising:** Faculty can better mentor and advise Deaf students, supporting their academic journeys and fostering a supportive educational environment (Lane *et al.*, 2011).

Overall, learning sign language equips faculty with significant skills that enhance their teaching effectiveness, communication abilities, and inclusivity. By embracing sign language, faculty not only improve their professional development but also contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape.

Challenges

Introducing sign language into the Indian CBSE curriculum presents numerous challenges that must be addressed to ensure effective implementation.

1. **A Revision of Syllabus and Policy:** Furthermore, the integration of sign language into existing syllabi is complex and requires substantial revisions to align with educational goals set by the CBSE (NCERT, 2019). Policy implementation challenges also exist, as enforcing supportive policies for sign language education within the broader educational framework remains complex (NCERT, 2019).
2. **Resource Constraints:** One of the primary obstacles is the resource constraints, particularly the limited availability of trained sign language instructors and teaching materials, which significantly hampers effective instruction. Inadequate infrastructure, including the lack of interpreters and accessible technology for deaf students, further complicates the situation.

3. **Training:** Additionally, there is a pressing need for extensive teacher training to develop proficiency in sign language, as Teachers need to have a large vocabulary in sign language to effectively convey material.
4. **Social Outlook:** Social attitudes also play a significant role in the successful integration of sign language education. Prevalent stigmas and misconceptions regarding sign language and Deaf culture can hinder societal acceptance although basically, people have the desire to learn sign language, and they feel that sign language is important to implement communication between people. Also, people who are not familiar with sign language feel that sign language is important.

On the other hand, Children who are deaf often tend to feel uncomfortable in the classroom when drawing attention to their hearing problem. They want to be like their friends with 'normal' hearing, so this drives them to mainly keep to themselves and prefer to not take part in classroom activities.

5. **Intricacy:** Sign language recognition poses significant challenges due to the intricate hand gestures, body postures, and facial expressions involved, which often incorporate rapid and complex movements. Hand gesture recognition is a complex aspect of sign language recognition that is characterised by high inter-class similarities, significant intra-class variation, and frequent obstructions in hand morphologies, leading to substantial complexity and variability.
6. **Time Constraints:** With students having to cover readability, there may not be enough time in the school curriculum to teach sign language alongside the regular coursework.
7. **Teaching Students:** Students may not understand sign language when asking questions which implies, in order to teach in sign language, one need to teach the recipient sign language.
8. **Insufficient Support from Parents:** Parents of disabled students tend to keep their children away from regular school systems. Parents keep their kids away from others for a long time, only to send them off to school when they're too old psychologically to adjust, and regular people avoid interacting with and teaching skills to disabled people, leaving them alone

No Mountain Too High

1. **Teach sign language at an early age:** Studies show that deaf children who learn sign language at an early age have better cognitive skills and a larger vocabulary.

2. **Involve family members:** Having an open line of communication with the child's parents will help to ensure that the child has consistent support both at school and home. Meeting with the parents face-to-face will enable you both to discuss any concerns you may have and track the child's progress.
3. **Integrate sign language naturally:** Incorporate sign language into daily classroom routines, greetings, instructions, and discussions.
4. **Use the speech method:** The speech method uses spoken language and lip-reading to supplement sign language.
5. **Trainings and courses:** Teachers should take quick courses in sign language to improve their skills. Also, to stay current with the current trends in the education of students with hearing impairment, teachers who work with hearing-impaired children should regularly attend workshops and seminars.
6. **Foster a sense of community:** In this way, other students will watch out for bullying and make a stand against it.
7. **Collaborate with Deaf Schools:** Collaboration between teachers of students who are deaf and hard of hearing (TSDHH) and educational audiologists is essential when developing successful, comprehensive service delivery plans for students who are deaf and hard of hearing

Discussion

The findings from this research highlight the critical role of inclusive education in fostering a supportive learning environment for all students, particularly those with disabilities. The emphasis on integrating sign language into the curriculum is not merely a matter of compliance with policy; it represents a fundamental shift toward recognizing the linguistic and cultural identities of Deaf students. By adopting a comprehensive approach to inclusive education, as advocated by the CBSE and NEP 2020, schools can address the barriers that have historically marginalized these learners.

Despite the existing guidelines, the practical implementation of inclusive education remains fraught with challenges. The divergence between partial and full inclusion poses significant questions about educational equity.

Whilst partial inclusion often leads to a continuation of inequalities, full inclusion, which seeks to integrate all students into mainstream settings, can promote a richer learning environment. Advocates argue that full inclusion dismantles ableism by ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, learn alongside one another. This approach is crucial for fostering empathy and understanding among diverse groups, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society.

The integration of sign language as a skill subject is a vital step toward achieving these goals. The research underscores the cognitive, social, and professional benefits of learning sign language, not only for students with hearing impairments but for all learners.

By embracing sign language, educational institutions can cultivate a culture of inclusivity, enhance communication, and promote the understanding of Deaf culture. Furthermore, faculty members equipped with sign language skills are better positioned to create inclusive classroom experiences, thereby enriching the educational landscape.

However, the challenges to implementing sign language education, including resource constraints, social attitudes, and policy inconsistencies, cannot be overlooked. Engaging stakeholders and the Deaf community is essential to develop strategies that promote acceptance and understanding. Continuous professional development for teachers and the creation of standardized curricula are necessary steps to ensure effective instruction and consistency across educational settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, inclusive education is not just an educational ideal; it is a moral imperative that demands collective responsibility. The integration of sign language into the curriculum as a skill subject is a critical component of this mission, as it supports the educational needs of Deaf students and promotes broader societal acceptance of diversity.

By incorporating sign language into the CBSE curriculum, we can facilitate full inclusion, ensuring that all students—regardless of their abilities—learn together in a shared environment. This approach not only dismantles barriers created by ableism but also fosters mutual respect and understanding among peers.

Whilst there are considerable challenges to overcome, the potential benefits of an inclusive educational framework are profound, impacting not only the lives of students with disabilities but enriching the educational experience for all.

By embracing sign language, educational institutions can cultivate a culture of inclusivity, enhance communication, and promote the understanding of Deaf culture. Furthermore, faculty members equipped with sign language skills are better positioned to create inclusive classroom experiences, thereby enriching the educational landscape.

Implementing comprehensive strategies, engaging in community advocacy, and prioritizing ongoing teacher training will be essential to realizing the full potential of inclusive education. As we move forward, a commitment to inclusivity, equity, and the recognition of diverse communication modes will shape the future of education.

Through these efforts, we can create a more just and equitable educational landscape, paving the way for an inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. By making sign language a skill subject within the CBSE curriculum, we can ensure that all students are empowered to communicate effectively and participate fully in their educational journeys.

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