

## ASSESSING CHANGES IN AWARENESS LEVEL ABOUT AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

The right to education is universal and expands to all children, youth and adults with or without disabilities. The presence of learners with disabilities and special educational needs in regular education presents enormous pedagogical challenges for education systems around the world. Current trends in education are moving toward more inclusive educational experiences for children with disabilities, alternative learning styles, and differentiated instructional practices to support all students to succeed. So, it implies that all teachers and classrooms must be equipped with the supports needed for children with special needs (CWSN). The policy of inclusion is often difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive environment. The challenge becomes acute with students with invisible disabilities. This is often not due to the lack of intent or understanding. But often disability awareness is not a regular in-depth component of teacher-training courses, leaving teachers ill-equipped to manage disability. School going children need to be aware of other children with special needs. In this case study a pre and post analysis of awareness visit among school children show that there was a marked increase in awareness level. To make inclusive education a reality in the true sense then disability awareness needs to start early.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, invisible disability, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Teacher education, awareness

### Introduction

The presence of learners with disabilities and special educational needs in regular education presents enormous pedagogical challenges for education systems around the world. It has been variously stated that inclusive education systems develop schools based on a child-centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children.<sup>1,2</sup> The concept of inclusion is widely discussed in today's society, but there is often confusion in defining its meaning and distinguishing it from integration. While integration refers to sharing space between people

with and without disabilities, inclusion goes beyond sharing the same space, it also involves a feeling of belonging, valuing, acceptance of being part of the society or group in which one finds one-self.<sup>3</sup>

When a disabled child does get the opportunity to receive a quality education, doors are opened. This enables them to secure other rights throughout their lifetime, fostering better access to jobs, health and other services. For education to play this role as 'an enabling right', it must be of high quality, available equitably, built to tackle discrimination and allow each child to flourish according to their own talents and interests.<sup>4</sup>

The right to education is universal and expands to all children, youth and adults with or without disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 replaces the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995. The number of disabilities listed rises from seven in the 1995 Act through 19 in the 2014 bill to 21 after the amendments, including acid attack and Parkinson's disease. Several among them are invisible disabilities. In the syllabi for Teacher Education it is often not possible to provide in depth information of so many types of disabilities and the different teaching styles best suited for each type.

Research has established that teachers are key players in support for inclusion.<sup>5,6</sup> But teachers may start to use different techniques of teaching only when the disability of the student is ascertained. So, it is imperative to provide practical exposure to the trainee teachers. If trainee teachers were to spend some weeks in a special needs school as part of their curriculum, they would gain an insight to identify children with special needs (CWSNs). Likewise, if trainee teachers pursuing special B. Ed spend some weeks in a mainstream school the experience would be enriching. The in-service teachers should have a means to update their knowledge and hone their skills by means of refresher courses, workshops etc.

Lipsky and Gartner<sup>7</sup> (1996) defined inclusion as "the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe impairments, in the neighborhood school, in age-appropriate general education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child or the teacher) both to assure the child's success - academic, behavioral, and social - and to prepare the child to participate as a full and contributing member of the society."

A significant aspect in the above definition is often lost while trying to incorporate inclusive education viz. "with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child or the teacher) both to assure the child's success." Support services for different types of disability will vary. Furthermore, these support systems may vary from student to student with disability like autism. For example, visual supports are helpful for persons with ASD by providing static messages to assist with organization and difficulty with recall. A child with ASD may prefer a visual mode for learning as they may have difficulties in processing auditory information. With a visual display, the child has time to see all the possibilities, has time to process the message, and has time to check the options as often as he or she needs before making a decision. But visual supports will be different for different students with ASD.

### **Right to education for the disabled student**

The right of children with special needs to attend a regular school has its genesis in many international statements like the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Over the years there have been numerous acts of legislation that have

advocated students with special needs to be out of isolated educational environments and into classrooms with their regular education counterparts. 21st century education systems have a clear need for teachers who are sufficiently competent and motivated to know how to include children with disabilities (and those from other marginalized groups) in all classrooms.

Current trends in education are moving toward more inclusive educational experiences for children with disabilities, alternative learning styles, and differentiated instructional practices to support all students to succeed.<sup>8</sup> Students with disabilities have been increasingly receiving special education services in general education classrooms.<sup>9</sup> In order to develop the skills, experience and confidence to be inclusive of all children, teachers need to learn about and practice inclusive education during initial teacher preparation. It is therefore vital that teacher education prepares teachers to be inclusive – not just by teaching them the theory of inclusive education, but by equipping them with the practical skills they need to identify barriers to access, participation and learning, to be reflective, critical thinkers and problem-solvers, and to actively challenge discrimination.

### **The disabled student population**

According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 1.67% of India's population between the age of 1 and 19 suffer from at least some form of a disability. There are 12 million children living with disabilities in India and 35.39% of all people with disabilities in the country are children. There are 'special needs schools' for students with special educational needs (SEN). There are more than 2,500 special needs schools for children with disabilities in India. A few are supported by the government while a vast majority of such schools are run by NGOs and private institutions.

In an inclusive school, the special educator works hand in hand with regular teachers so that special educational needs are met within the school premises itself. The regular teacher is ready to modify the teaching learning content as per the suggestions and advice of the special educator and parents whereas the special teacher works in close collaboration with the regular teacher to meet the academic goals of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) and other learners.

### **Challenges for Teachers**

Teachers are the ones entrusted with the task of making inclusion a reality. The policy of inclusion is often difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive environment. The challenge becomes acute with students with invisible disabilities. This is often not due to the lack of intent or understanding. But often disability awareness is not a regular in-depth component of teacher-training courses, leaving teachers ill-equipped to manage disability. The teachers face lot of problems in transferring what is learnt in training to actual diverse classroom learning situation this might be happening due to the mismatch between the teacher training curriculum and the schools realities. Pre-service teacher education failed to prepare student teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms.<sup>10</sup>

A theoretical paper of 50 marks on 'Creating an Inclusive School' does make the trainee teacher aware of inclusive education but it is hardly adequate to prepare the trainee teacher for actual classroom situation involving a student with disability. The behaviours displayed by the students could be because of the inherent disability in the student and the lack of

appropriate support in the classroom. Invisible Disabilities like (ASD) autism spectrum disorder, auditory processing disorders or learning disorders viz. dyslexia, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, and Dyspraxia could be the cause. Or other disorders like Learning Disability, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and/or psychiatric disabilities like Bipolar disorder, schizophrenia among students could result in unusual behaviours.

To deal with the situation the teachers must be competent enough to understand the underlying cause of these behaviours and then use appropriate teaching strategy. Teacher education has a crucial role to play in ensuring that classroom teachers are prepared for the challenges of educating all students with disabilities. It is imperative to prepare teachers for inclusion in all curricular plans for pre-service teachers and also for teachers in services.

To make inclusive education a reality in the true sense then disability awareness needs to start early. School going children need to be aware of other children with special needs. In this case study a pre and post analysis of awareness visit among school children was carried out.

## Material and Methods

Students of the different units of Narayana Group of Schools visited Autism Society West Bengal (ASWB), a parent-initiated NGO (non-government organization) on 30<sup>th</sup> November and 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2023. All these students had Psychology as one of their subject and were of standard XII.. Before the students got their orientation lecture on autism, they were asked to fill up a Google Form. After this they listened to the lectures and observed classes taken by RCI certified special educators in the different sections of ASWB. A post visit Google Form was shared with them. A total of 49 students took part in the pre visit survey. 45 students filled up the post visit form.

## Result and discussion

**Table 1. Examples of questions asked during the survey**

Sl. No.	Question	Pre-Visit	Post-visit	Remarks	Reference
1	Can autism be cured with medicine?	81.6% of the students felt that autism could not be cured with any medicine	93.3% of the students felt that autism could not be cured with any medicine	Autism is a developmental disorder so there is no cure.	Fig. 1a & 1b
2	Can autistic persons be employed?	59.2% of the students felt that autistic individuals could be employed. 16.3% felt they could not be employed while 24.5% said that they did not know the answer.	84.4% of the students felt that autistic individuals could be employed. 11.1% felt they could not be employed while the rest said that they did not know the answer.	Inclusive education is a common word. School students are likely to have met other students with special needs. But whether disabled persons get jobs is not	Fig. 2a & 2b

				clear to many.	
3	Can ALL autistic people talk?	51% students felt that all autistic persons could not talk while 34.7 % students felt that ALL autistic people talk 14.9%. said that they were not sure.	75,6% students felt that all autistic persons could not talk while 24.4 % students felt that ALL autistic people talk. None said that they were not sure.	Many autistic individuals are non-verbal and some have limited need based speech.	Fig. 3a & 3b
4	Is autism contagious?	32.7% of the students felt that autism is contagious.	32.7% of the students felt that autism is contagious.	20% of the students felt that autism is contagious.	Fig. 4a & 4b
5	Can autistic persons get educated?	95.6% of the students felt that autistic persons get educated.	95.6% of the students felt that autistic persons get educated.	Different teaching methods need to be adapted for educating autistic students. There was no change in the pre and post response percentage.	Fig. 5a & 5b

The responses of some of the important questions

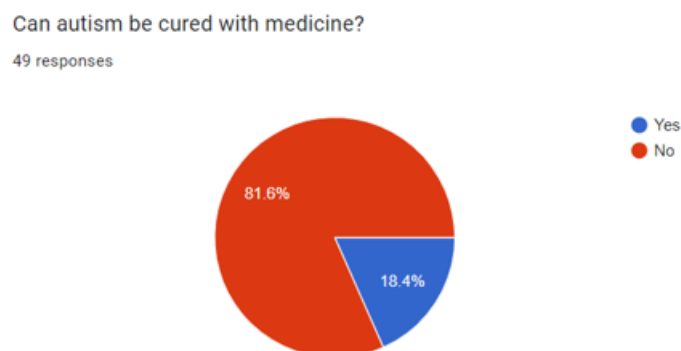


Fig. 1a Pre visit response

Can autism be cured with medicine?

45 responses

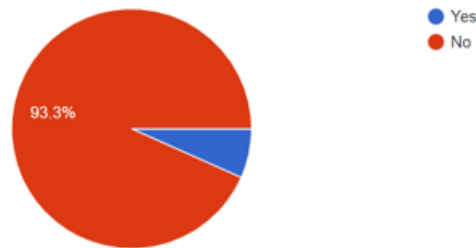


Fig. 1b Post visit response

The fact that autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder and not a disease is not known to many general public. But as these school children have Psychology as one of their papers many were aware that autism was not a disease and it could not be cured.

Can autistic persons be employed?

49 responses

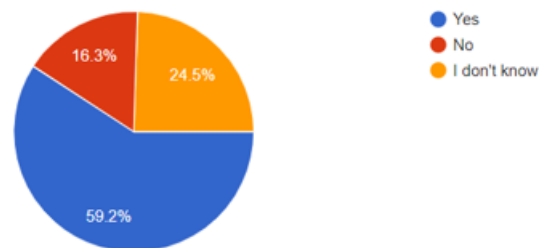


Fig. 2a Pre visit response

Can autistic persons be employed?

45 responses

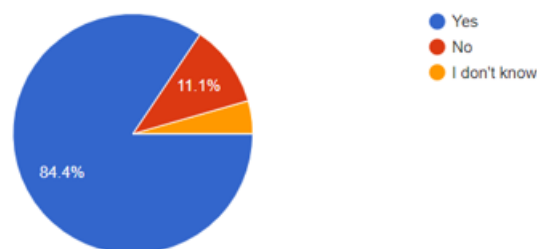


Fig. 2b Post visit response

The students who participated in the study knew about students with special needs as they had seen such students in their respective schools. But the fact that autistic people given the appropriate reasonable accommodations could be employed was not known to many before the visit to ASWB. Their perceptions changed after the visit

Can ALL autistic people talk?

49 responses

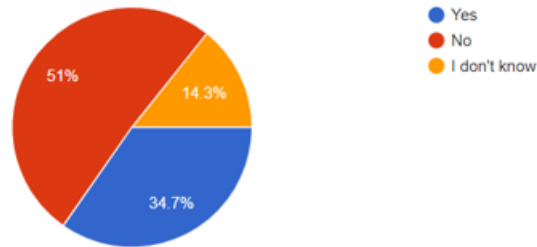


Fig. 3a Pre visit response

Can ALL autistic people talk?

45 responses

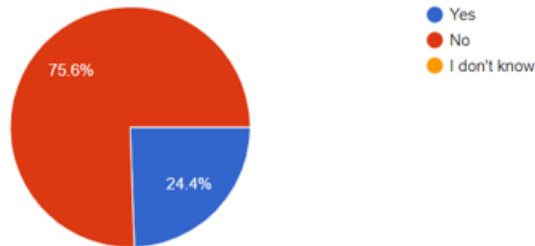


Fig. 3b Post visit response

Generally the autistic students in mainstream education are verbal in India so 34.7% of the students felt that all autistic people can talk. After the visit this percentage came down to 24%. So just a half day visit to a special school can change perceptions quite drastically.

Is autism contagious?

49 responses

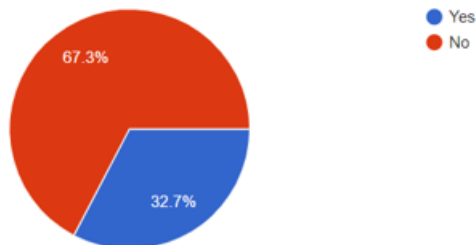


Fig. 4a Pre visit response

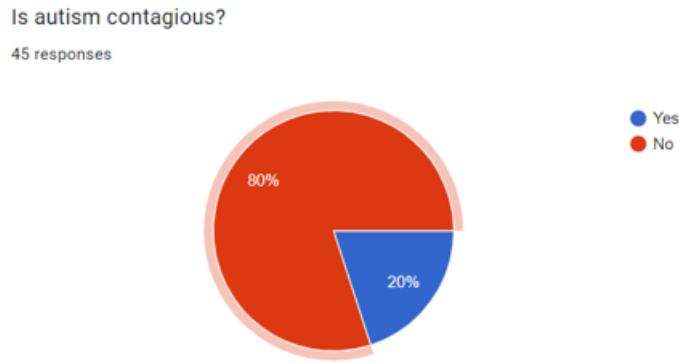


Fig. 4b Post visit response

Often the general public has a misconception that certain disabilities are contagious like infectious diseases. This misconception around autism was resolved after the visit to ASWB.

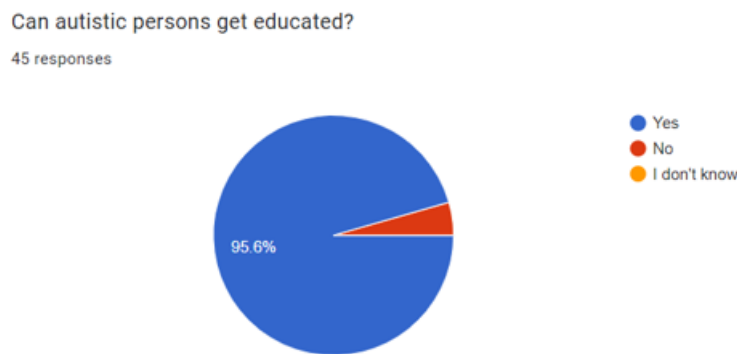


Fig. 5a Pre visit response

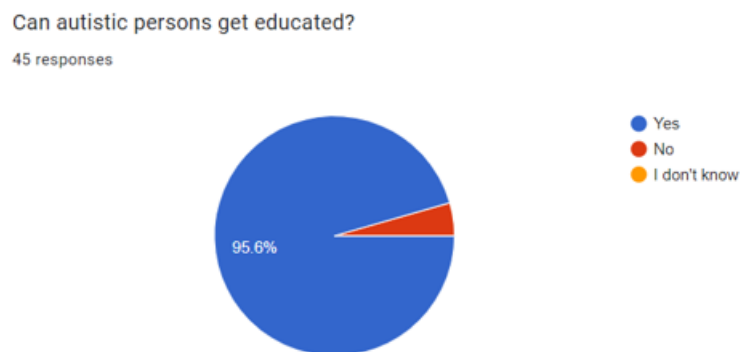


Fig. 5b Post visit response



The question whether autistic individuals could be educated or not produced the same result. Possibly as the students were from Psychology back-ground they had prior knowledge that different teaching methods viz. structured teaching method, experiential learning needed to be implemented for educating autistic students as per their need.

### **Conclusion**

In this case study the pre and post analysis among school children of different Narayana Group of schools showed remarkable changes in the awareness level. (Table 1). School going children need to be aware of other children with special needs. When awareness about disability starts early in school chances are that these children will have a more inclusive approach if they take up teaching a profession in the future.

The inclusive teacher recognizes individual differences and implements learning strategies for all. Teachers play a significant role in making education more inclusive, through their approach to learners, the methods and materials they use, their ability to welcome diversity and see it as strength, and their capacity to adapt and respond to challenges and diverse learning needs. When awareness about disability starts early among school children it will have a deeper understanding as these students grow up. Teachers who have got an opportunity about disability are likely to be better in the art of 'education for all.' To make inclusive education a reality in the true sense then disability awareness needs to start early.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this work.

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