

In Transit | Special Educators in the Framework for Inclusion in Education

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This report is an independent, non-commissioned piece of work by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, an independent think-tank doing legal research to help make better laws and improve governance for the public good.

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1. Introduction

Despite the concerted efforts towards universalisation of education, persons with disabilities are among the many marginalised groups in India who struggle to access quality education. While the all-India literacy rate was 77.7% as per the 75th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS), the 76th Round of the NSS revealed that only 52.2% of disabled persons aged 7 years and above were literate. Further, only 19.3% of disabled persons had completed secondary education and above, while the corresponding figure was 38.7% for all persons aged 15 years and above. This is supported by a survey on estimation of out-of-school children (Social & Rural Research Institute and EdCIL, 2014) which reported that a much greater proportion of disabled children were out of school as compared to the total out of school children in India. The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has attributed the relatively poor educational status of persons with disabilities to (i) continued societal prejudice; (ii) delayed identification and thereby delayed therapeutic and rehabilitative interventions; (iii) limitations in accessibility; and (iv) lack of trained teaching staff (Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment, 2020, pp. 48–49).

The availability of trained teachers and the quality of teaching methods they employ form a significant basis of achieving inclusion of all students in education,¹ including those with disabilities. At the policy level, teacher quality is a function of the quality of teacher education, curriculum and training, minimum qualification standards for employment, and continuous professional development (Azam & Kingdon, 2015). Studies focusing specifically on the efficacy of inclusion programmes in case of students with disabilities also cite teacher training and post course completion support as important factors (Rose & Rajanahally, 2019; Singal, 2019).

In India, the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)² is responsible for developing and implementing norms and standards for teacher education (Sharma, 2019). Curiously, a section of teachers, ‘special educators’—who have been getting trained in methods for teaching students with specific disabilities—do not fall under the purview of the NCTE. Instead, special educators’ education and training are regulated under the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI).

The Rehabilitation Council was constituted as a registered society in 1986, resulting from discussions held by the National Handicapped Council (NHC),³ an institute under the MSJE.⁴ The body received statutory status under the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 (RCI Act), and became the Rehabilitation Council of India, in June 1993. Its mandate was to regulate human resource development in the ‘field’ of rehabilitation related to disability (Kundu, 2000).

¹ See Brinkmann (2020) who looks at the continuing exclusionary worldviews of teachers in some Indian states, providing evidence that such views and beliefs are only a reflection of views in the wider society.

² NCTE is a statutory body set up under the National Council for Teacher Education Act, 1993.

³ NHC was an institution comprising Union Ministry representatives, non-government organisations such as the All India Federation of the Deaf, Bhagwan Mahavir Viklang Samiti, Dr. P. K. Sethi of the Jaipur Foot, National Association for the Blind, Navedic Prosthetic Centre of Chandigarh, Spastic Society of Bombay, West Bengal Spastic Society etc., and the National Institutes under the Ministry

⁴ RS Deb 21 July 1992, Part 2 (Other Than Question and Answer), vol 164, col 299 (1992a)

Of the 16 categories of rehabilitation professionals and personnel registered with the RCI, approximately 75% are engaged in special education and training.⁵ Thus, design of curriculum for special educators, their registration, and the recognition and monitoring of teacher training institutions form a significant proportion of the RCI's responsibilities. Despite a legislative framework now calling for "inclusive education"⁶ for children with disabilities, it is important to examine what justifies this institutional separation in matters of teacher regulation.

Lack of coordination between the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) and the Ministry of Education (MoE)⁷ has earlier too been pointed out as an impediment to improving the education status of disabled students (as cited in Das & Shah, 2014, p. 575; UNESCO, 2019), with the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment agreeing to the need for greater coordination between departments of the two ministries. They have specifically asked the DEPwD to completely converge their efforts with those of the MoE in order to be able to train in-service teachers of all the schools so that they can support students with disabilities (Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment, 2020, pp. 50–51). The UNESCO Status of Education Report (2019) cited above goes further to suggest that teacher preparation should fall under one regulatory authority.

It is also to be noted that India signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Although the said Convention came into effect from 2008, the RCI Act is yet to be harmonised with the principles of this international treaty and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Meanwhile, the recently notified proposed amendments to the RCI Act, although not signifying any transformational changes, propose to appoint the Chairperson of the NCTE or their nominee to the RCI.⁸

1.1. Objectives of the Study

It is against the above backdrop that this study set out to examine the following:

- To understand the education and work experiences of special educators and the roles they perform in delivery of education;
- To understand the role and relevance of the RCI in ensuring (i) quality and (ii) supply of teaching staff for delivery of education to students with disabilities;
- To examine the experience of special educators in their interaction with the RCI.

1.2. Methods

This study relied on a combination of primary and secondary data. Desk research was conducted to document the role of the RCI in ensuring quality and supply of special educators, and the reasoning behind educators' classification as 'rehabilitation professionals' to be supervised by a council set up for that purpose. We relied on resources available on the RCI website, including their annual reports and other publications such as the Status of Disability in India Reports brought out periodically; parliamentary discussions on the Rehabilitation Council of India Bill, 1992; and court cases on the RCI, which largely dealt with employment criteria for special educators.

⁵ As on 29 September 2020; a category wise updated list of registered professionals and personnel was made available vide RTI request 5-172/RCI/RTI-3447. The list can be accessed in the annexure to this report.

⁶ See Sections 16 and 17, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

⁷ The Ministry of Human Resource Development has been renamed as the Ministry of Education with the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020.

⁸ Section 3A(3)(k) of proposed amendments to the RCI Act, 1992 (DEPwD, 2020).

We collected primary data to understand the experiences of special educators across various roles they perform, and their interaction with the Council. For the same, we randomly selected special educators listed on the RCI's Central Rehabilitation Register (CRR), from the states of Bihar and Maharashtra.⁹

We arrived at this method on the basis of a preliminary round of telephonic conversations in August end 2020 with 10 special educators and three other rehabilitation professionals in six states/union territories viz. Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra and Nagaland. These states were chosen from six of the seven older zones defined by the RCI in 2002 for setting up Zonal Coordination Committees.¹⁰ While the RCI has a more direct bearing on training institutions and curriculum design, it became clear through these conversations that interviewing a randomly sampled list of individuals from both states rather than focusing on certain institutes or schools would help us understand wider education and work pursuits of special education registrants as well as their perceptions about the field in their local context.

We were able to conduct semi-structured interviews via telephone, with 82 special educators from Bihar and Maharashtra who agreed to participate in the study. Further, 11 interested respondents participated in a second round of follow-up interviews which were aimed at understanding their education and work experiences.

One major limitation of this exercise is that we could only account for the role of *RCI registered* special educators, which leaves out the important roles of students and their peers, their families, regular teachers and teaching and non-teaching staff in education institutes not registered with the RCI.

⁹ The RCI, like other professional councils, maintains a register of rehabilitation professionals and personnel called as the CRR. As per Section 23(2) of the RCI Act, 1992, the Register is a public document within the meaning of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. It can be accessed on the RCI's website.

¹⁰ These seven zonal committees (ZCCs) have been further divided and now total to 14 ZCCs.

2. Special educators within the context of the RCI

2.1. Special educators and school education in India

Education provisioning in case of persons with disabilities is hinged on the understanding of disability historically and interventions by both state and society thereof. On the basis of this understanding, the existence of separate special schools and special education teachers are understood as provisions on a continuum (Chennat, 2019) as they currently enable education access as per appropriate modifications and also as structures that segregate. For instance, Tomlinson (2017) has studied the special needs industry's manufacture to segregate students from ethnic and racial minority communities and those falling behind in class in case of the U.S. and England.

When considering education needs of disabled students in India, especially of those with hearing impairment, visual impairment and intellectual and developmental disabilities, specific learning disabilities and multiple disabilities, there are teachers working with them in regular schools (both general and special educators), special schools, and mobile teachers. All of them perform varied roles in provisioning education, and face diverse but related issues in performing their roles. This situation is not different from other low- and middle-income countries (Howgego et al., 2014). While multiple studies have documented the challenges of special educators and general teachers, they largely focus on their attitudes towards inclusion (Howgego et al., 2014, pp. 18–20) and occupational stress, which are considered key to evaluating the efficacy of inclusive education programmes.

In the case of special educators, occupational stress and anxiety—attributed to low salaries, job insecurity, work over-load, and high teacher-student ratios—are cited as impediments to success (Mathew, 2005). Studies on implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) in relation to students with disabilities have laid down the itinerant teaching framework under the erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in several states (Astha, 2017; Rao et al., 2020; Soni, 2003). Special educators working as itinerant/mobile teachers complain of unclear job descriptions and a large ambit of work responsibilities (Lynch & McCall, 2007).

The regular classroom teacher's participation is crucial for students' meaningful inclusion in education. The largest body of work thus studies regular teachers' attitudes and approach towards inclusion, and it is found that while there is some acceptance of inclusion in theory, it does not always translate into practice (Tiwari et al., 2015). Further to this, in special schools, special educators, and not regular teachers, are responsible for delivering education to students with specific disabilities.

It is equally important to acknowledge that the teacher is in fact just one actor along with parents and other family members, peers, community,¹¹ and the state in the process of inclusion in education. Also, notwithstanding the significance of the teacher in education and the inclusion process specifically, it is necessary to understand that with respect to persons with disabilities, special educators and rehabilitation professionals more broadly have been in a dominant position vis-à-vis individuals with disabilities. Disability rights movements in western countries have been very critical of support being tied with the expertise provided by designated professionals and educators (Oliver, 1999). More recently, Ghosh (2016) alerted us about the unequal role of special education professionals in case of debates on the new disability law in India, as provided in the following extract:

¹¹ See Anand (2008) and Hammad (2019) for an appreciation of the family's role in the inclusion process; Naraian & Natarajan (2013) who studied how youth with disabilities perceived their relationship with non-disabled classroom peers; Lang (1999) and Wickenden (2019) for understanding the role of community-based rehabilitation, difficulties in such programmes' implementation and evaluation, and how they may enable disabled individuals and their families to organise.

The debate on inclusive education was limited by the special education professionals by citing the specialist nature of the interventions required for each type of impairment, which established the hegemony of different groups of professionals over domains of knowledge and rejected the possibility of creating systems of learning that cater to difference, not just of so called ability but also to other dimensions such as gender, caste, religion, ethnicity and language. (p. 15)

The specialised nature of the workforce may further the imbalance between ‘expert’ advice and knowledge of the individual and family. While being cognisant of the educators’ dominant position, it is still important to study the experiences of special educators, social workers, rehabilitation workers etc. in relation to that of students’ so that governance as well as policy reforms can be bettered. Such studies are even more important in contexts such as India’s where there is still poor access to rehabilitation services, as has been identified by the DEPwD.

2.2. RCI's institution

Rehabilitation in the case of disability, as provided under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPD Act), is aimed at enabling one “to attain and maintain optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological, environmental or social function levels”¹² Yet, it has been observed that rehabilitation is still used as a catchall term to talk about disability-related services in general. This tends to imply a continuation of the “medical-model” understanding of disability (UN OHCHR, 2019, p. 7). Approaching disability through the medical model has meant focussing the disability onto the individual and understanding it as a lack which would have to be corrected to participate in the society (UN OHCHR, 2019, p. 7).¹³ The need for the Rehabilitation Council, as gauged through a review of parliamentary debates, appears to have emerged within this limited understanding of disability.

Reasons for its constitution highlighted in the RCI’s earlier publications, including their annual reports, point to a dearth of trained human resources in the "field" (RCI, 2006; S. K. Sharma, 2009); and while institutions/universities were offering courses to train individuals, the courses were unregulated and non-standardised, and were being conducted in an isolated and ad-hoc manner. The NHC highlighted these issues from the perspective of trainees who were being awarded different certifications (diploma, degrees etc.) for pursuing courses with similar syllabus and durations.¹⁴ These gaps, they felt were a key reason why programmes aimed for persons with disabilities were not making progress. They therefore pointed out the need for a coordination body that could prescribe syllabi and standardise courses for individuals training to enter the field.

The NHC’s vision for such a body however, was emerging from a service provisioning approach, whereby the person with disability would be at the receiving end of rehabilitation interventions performed by rehabilitation ‘professionals’. While the need for a, “uniformed common approach towards training programmes” was reasonable, the NHC was comparing its role to that of the then Indian Medical Council, the Indian Nursing Council and Pharmacy Council – bodies regulating education and practice of health-care professionals. The NHC noted that the said bodies had “succeeded in creating a cadre of paramedical workers, nurses, engineers, technicians etc.”¹⁵ due to the professions’ standardisation.

¹² Section 2(za), RPD Act (2016)

¹³ However, see Anand (2016) to understand the various models in use to understand disability over time and also their limitations in the Indian context.

¹⁴ RS Deb 21 July 1992, vol 164 cols 299.

¹⁵ ibid, cols 299-300.

During parliamentary discussions on the Rehabilitation Council of India Bill, 1992 (RCI Bill) members did point out some of the more pressing issues relating to disabilities, such as their prevention¹⁶ due to polio and trachoma among others, and employment (including reservation in jobs),¹⁷ housing¹⁸ and education¹⁹ needs of persons with specific disabilities. However, these were matters beyond the limited scope of the RCI Bill which was merely focused on the creation of a standardised rehabilitation workforce.²⁰ As stated by the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Welfare then,²¹ the proposed Rehabilitation Council was envisaged as an institute that (i) would standardise training for professionals; and (ii) would allow only individuals pursuing recognised courses to provide ‘services’ to disabled persons. These continue to be the primary roles of the RCI even today.

2.3. Role of the RCI today

Professionals and personnel. The RCI regulates²² and monitors the training of a range of ‘rehabilitation professionals and personnel’ including audiologists and speech therapists, clinical psychologists, hearing aid and ear mould technicians, rehabilitation engineers and technicians, vocational counsellors, employment officers, etc. Among these professionals are special educators. The professionals are also supposed to be registered with the RCI. As per Section 13(2)(b), persons not on the Council’s Register are disallowed from practicing anywhere in India, where practice has been defined as treating persons with disabilities, counselling and teaching them, and fitting or adjusting aids and appliances.²³

Training institutions. Apart from personnel, the RCI also recognizes²⁴ and monitors all courses on rehabilitation and special education offered by institutions and universities in the country, and, as per the amendment to the Act in 2000, its scope has been expanded to promote research on rehabilitation and special education. With such an expanded scope, the RCI needs to clearly outline its role in education, and how that might be distinct from its role in rehabilitation, especially with the RPD Act now in place. A recent report on Article 26 of the UNCRPD flags that rehabilitation does not mean every kind of support that persons with disabilities may require for improved participation in society. In that respect, it points out that access to inclusionary education services “should not be read as rehabilitation...” (UN OHCHR, 2019, p. 6). Further, it mentions that differentiating between rehabilitation and other forms of support, although it may be difficult to do this sometimes, will help in better planning and programme implementation (UN OHCHR, 2019).

Importantly, and implied by the functions it plays, the RCI provides guidelines for who is eligible to work as a rehabilitation professional, and in this case, a special educator.²⁶ For example, in *Jayashri Manohar*

¹⁶ ibid, cols 294-295.

¹⁷ LS Deb 20 August 1992, vol 15, cols 262, 268-269; ibid, col 296 (1992b)

¹⁸ RS Deb 21 July 1992, vol 164, col 304.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ It is also to be noted that a more comprehensive legislation regarding persons with disabilities was on its way which came to be the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995

²¹ RS Deb 21 July 1992, vol 164, cols 288-289.

²² Sections 13, 19 and 20, Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 (1992).

²³ Section 2(d), RCI (Standards of Professional Conduct, Etiquette and Code of Ethics for Rehabilitation Professionals) Regulations, 1998 (1998).

²⁴ Sections 11 and 17, RCI Act, 1992

²⁵ Sections 14, 15 and 16, RCI Act, 1992

²⁶ However, also see the differentiation between professionals and personnel as provided under the Rehabilitation Council of India Regulations, 1997. As per Section 25(4), professionals are those individuals who have acquired the requisite degrees/qualification and gained expertise in their area whereas personnel are those who either have acquired the qualification or are registered because they have experience of working with persons with disabilities. It is further mentioned that the latter can ‘upgrade’ to the position of a professional if they acquire the prescribed qualifications and experience.

Kale v. State of Maharashtra and Ors.,²⁷ the Court decided in favour of the petitioner who despite completing her Diploma in Education for Hearing Impaired, prior to the RCI's establishment as a statutory body, was dismissed by the school where she was appointed as a special educator on grounds that the institute from where she had completed her diploma was derecognised by the RCI. This implied she was no longer registered with the Council. The matter was heard within the context of petitions filed by a union of students and teachers and the Court directing the RCI to conduct a bridge course for students whose qualifications stood derecognised.

Continuing education. The Council also has a Continuing Rehabilitation Education (CRE) component through which it aims to ensure that professionals and personnel are updating and upgrading their knowledge and skills (RCI, n.d.). CRE programmes are conducted by RCI approved institutions and associations/organisations that have been working in the area of disability (RCI, n.d.). Continuing education in the form of these programmes is mandatory for registered professionals to continue to be registered with the Council. Professionals are required to attain a minimum number of 'points' for reregistering with the Council every five years, which can primarily be done through attending CRE programmes. Other possible ways of attaining points include attending the CRE programmes as resource persons or presenters or undertaking research projects.

Regional coordination. Zonal Coordination Committees (ZCCs) form another layer to the RCI. The reasons for instituting ZCCs included enabling formal delegation of more responsibility to regional institutions, spreading awareness about various rehabilitation professions and developing courses which would suit the concerned region's needs as well as to help shorten the distance between approved institutes and the RCI (RCI, 2006, pp. 24–27). It is also primarily the monitoring of rehabilitation professionals' training as an added objective in the 2000 Amendment to the RCI Act which has led to the committees' institution.

Human resource development. Broadly, RCI's primary purpose behind these functions has been defined as measures "to accelerate and diversify human resource development... [so that both] rehabilitation and education²⁸ reach to every ... [person] with disability in the country" (Sharma, 2009, p. 21). With this purpose in mind, the Council has also reported deliberating on enhancement of "employment opportunities for the trained human resource i.e. special educators in regular schools and other institutions" at least as far back as 2005 (RCI, 2006, p. 8).

More recently, while laying out minimum qualifications for appointment as a general teacher for Classes I-VIII, the NCTE clarified that those trained in special education were equally eligible to apply.²⁹ Further, where there is a conflict between terms of appointment laid down by a State Government and the NCTE, the concerned State must comply with the academic authority's provisions.³⁰

In *Sarthak Ghosh and Others v. The State of West Bengal and Others*, the Court was hearing whether candidates with training in special education could be treated at par with those trained in general education.

²⁷ W.P. No. 7603/2003, Decision dated 10 June 2006.

²⁸ Note that earlier discussions on the RCI just focused on provision of rehabilitation services

²⁹ Alkazi & V (2011) too highlighted this significant development in Chapter IV (37-44) of their publication, 'Report of the stocktaking of RTE Act for children with disabilities'.

³⁰ *Chandrashekariah C.N. v. The State of Karnataka and Ors.*, WP 49295/2014 (S-RES), Decision dated 8 November 2016 [5]

Although clarifying that teaching students at large was no different from teaching students with disabilities, the main concern emerging from the judgment was regarding employment of those with special education training. It was stated as follows:³¹

If they [special education candidates] are not treated equally with the other candidates, nobody is likely to run the risk of putting in future, [*sic*] their career in jeopardy by doing a Diploma in Special Education with the result that the object of promoting inclusive education would be defeated.

That employment opportunities are perhaps the most immediate concern of special educators has also emerged from our interviews. The findings are discussed in the next part of the report.

³¹ WP 448 (W)/2017, Decision dated 1 March 2017 [48]

3. Findings from Bihar and Maharashtra

3.1. Demographic details of the participants

Our sample consisted of 82 registered special educators from two states, with 50% from 19 districts of Bihar, 46% from 21 districts of Maharashtra and three who were originally from Bihar but were employed outside the state at the time of the survey. 62% of the respondents from Bihar and 41% from Maharashtra were working or residing in rural areas. Nearly 70% of the respondents were male, and the remaining were female. Of the 42 individuals who responded to the question, 38% belonged to Other Backward Classes; 5% were from Scheduled Castes; approximately 55% were from dominant castes; and one respondent was from Nomadic Tribe-D. In case of their religion, approximately 85% of the 56 who responded were Hindus (48); five percent were Muslims (5); four percent were Buddhists (2) and one respondent identified as not belonging to any religious group. Nine respondents reported having a disability, of which four had a visual impairment and the remaining five identified as having some physical disability. While we could draw some conclusions on the basis of respondents' disability status and gender, the data on social category and religion is not significant enough to be able to draw inferences.

Findings presented below pertain to special educators' perceptions on their changing work roles, and the role of the RCI on the same.

3.2. Occupations of sampled special educators

The table below lists all the respondents as per their type of occupation and an occupation type's share in the total sample.

Type of Occupation	Number of Respondents			Share (In %)
	Bihar	Maharashtra	Other	
Itinerant teacher under SMSA	12	6	-	22
General teacher in general school ³²	2	1	-	10
Special educator in general school (including under the IEDSS Scheme)	-	4	1	
Special educator in special school	2	16	-	22
Special educator in children's home	1	-	-	1
Trainer at teacher training institute	1	-	2	4
Providing coaching/tuition	3	1	-	5
Caregiver (under Saksham, Bihar)	3	-	-	3.5
Primary occupation other than in the education field	7	7	-	17
Unemployed	8	2	-	12
Not in the labour force (including unpaid work at home/preparing for teaching job exams full-time)	2	1	-	3.5
Total	41	38	3	100

³² The term 'general teacher', as it has been used by our respondents, is being used to refer to regular school teachers here.

We found that our special educator respondents were primarily divided between teaching roles in the general school system (32%), in special schools (NGO-led and private-aided) (22%), and those who had left the teaching profession or were unemployed at the time of the survey (36%). Of those working in special schools, a significant 89% were from Maharashtra.

85% of those who had left the field (11 out of 13) reported having done so because they could not secure meaningful jobs. They had to largely fall back on self-employment. For example, respondents started their small business in scrap and granite, some had opened a kirana shop while one had gone back to farming. Of those who had left the field or were unemployed, 67% were from Bihar.

Those employed in the education sector, as also pointed out in Part 2 of this report, were engaged in various kinds of work. Among those in the general school system, 69% were employed as resource persons/block resource persons/resource teachers (within the mobile teaching or itinerant model) under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SMSA); 12% were employed as general teachers in general schools; and 19% were employed as special educators in general schools, including under the Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) Scheme in Maharashtra.

The remaining 9% of the total sample were providing coaching or tuitions privately or were trainers, including three who were training special education bachelor's/diploma students at training institutes. All the four respondents who are now providing tuitions/coaching as their primary occupation are doing so because they too could not secure suitable jobs. Take the case of the following teacher from Madhubani district, Bihar who informed us that he was providing tuitions to nearly 50 students and is trying to get into general school teaching simultaneously:

I am not working right now; I just take tuitions; passing time like this. I am also able to teach disabled students. I teach about 40-50 students at home. There were 2-4 H.I. [hearing impairment] students earlier, but now I have gotten them admitted [in the school]. The school has all the facilities for education and food; government is taking care of all the expenditure...I tried [for school teaching], but fell short of 2-4 marks on the CTET [Central Teacher Eligibility Test]. There are no vacancies in case of special teaching. They hired D.El.Ed. candidates in special education under the SSA at a lower salary, and didn't take B.Ed. candidates. They said they would take degree students also in the next vacancy, but no vacancy has come out. I will keep trying till I am eligible, but will keep going like this if nothing happens.

Further, many of the respondents were considering moving from their current jobs to new ones within the teaching or education field, and also outside of it. Bihar respondents specifically mentioned a new avenue, for employment and also better salaries, under their welfare department: Buniyad Centres. Few of these respondents were contemplating applying for the caregiver position at these centres, which is a non-teaching role. Similarly, many respondents in both states had moved, or were trying to move, from the private sector (special teaching in special schools or general teaching in private unaided schools) to government sector jobs.

3.2.1.What do these occupations constitute?

Resource persons. Respondents employed as itinerant teachers³³ in the position of 'resource persons' (RPs)³⁴ at the cluster level and 'block resource persons' (BRPs) at the block level under the SMSA, described their

³³ While it was reported that some special educators are to be specifically appointed to resource centres/rooms at the block level, our respondents were working on an itinerant basis.

³⁴ The respondents also referred to themselves as resource teachers.

job role as involving a combination of teaching and non-teaching work. An RP from Nanded, Maharashtra narrated:

I have to visit different government schools with children with special needs; visit NGOs; and visit multiple disability centres. I have to check whether online certification is done properly, whether the direct bank transfer services regarding schemes for children with special needs are working, whether children have proper access to the schemes to which they are entitled.

As previously documented (Rao et al., 2020), resource persons are assigned a range of roles and responsibilities, one of which is teaching support. These tend to vary from state to state depending upon provisions for community volunteers or caregivers to perform some of these roles (Astha, 2017). Most of our respondents pointed out that their primary roles with respect to education are to guide and counsel parents, students and their peers, and general teachers, by visiting a number of schools and homes, provide required adaptation and modifications to the curriculum, prepare individualised education plans (IEPs)³⁵ and train teachers. This is apart from responsibilities of surveying and identifying children who may have disabilities, ensuring their certification, directing them and their families to government support schemes such as scholarships, aids, appliances and therapy as per their disability, and organising sports and other events periodically, etc.

It is to be noted that these resource persons were appointed under the erstwhile SSA, where their support activities were limited to elementary schooling. They are now assigned to supporting students, guardians and teachers from early childhood to 18 years under the SMSA.

Special educators in general school. Special educators in Maharashtra are also appointed in general schools under Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan's (RMSA) IEDSS Scheme.³⁶ The respondents termed these schools as “integrated unit schools” wherein more than five³⁷ students with disabilities are enrolled. Each integrated unit school has to appoint special educators and have a resource room where teaching support is provided to students. All four respondents from Maharashtra employed under IEDSS described these as disability-specific units i.e. a unit for visual impairment had teaching and learning material for students with visual impairment, and appointed teachers specifically trained to teach students with visual impairment.

While these educators also focus on provisioning individualised support, they are appointed at the school level i.e. in one school. On the other hand, RPs have to visit many schools and homes under their assigned cluster or block in a district. Respondents from Bihar suggested that no such school-based permanent posts were available in their state. This difference seems to be congruent with disparities in budgetary allocations

³⁵ An IEP, as the phrase suggests, is an education plan specific to a student; it includes understanding the current learning level of a student, what teaching and curricular adaptations could be used as per the information collected on the student’s learning level etc. It should be prepared along with the class teacher, parents, and also the student. Such a plan should be able to help in monitoring the student’s learning progress. Refer to the UNESCO State of Education Report, 2019 (p. 78) to understand the steps involved in preparing an IEP and also the limitations of this form of planning.

³⁶ The IEDSS Scheme was started in 2009, revising on the scheme, Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC). While students with disabilities were being supported at the elementary schooling level under the SSA, the IEDSS Scheme was started to extend the same to secondary education in the general schooling system. It was aimed to support students to continue their education and also perform better. As per the same, special educators are to be appointed in government and government-aided schools or for a cluster of schools where more than five students with disabilities are enrolled. They are to provide teaching support to students, counsel parents, assist in training programmes, assessment etc. (See Appendix III of the scheme document here: www.schooleducation.kar.nic.in/minoedn/IEDSS/IEDSS-MHRDFormat&Proc.pdf).

³⁷ A respondent pointed out that the minimum number of students was earlier eight and had been reduced to six for each integrated unit.

towards disability-specific schemes under SSA and RMSA, across states. Maharashtra had approved nearly 25% of its RMSA outlay towards the IEDSS Scheme for the 2017-18 period as against Bihar which had approved only 0.4% of its RMSA outlay towards the same (UNESCO, 2019, pp. 115–116).

Educators appointed at special schools. Similar to those appointed under the IEDSS, special educators employed in special schools reported working primarily with students with those disabilities in which they had specialized. This is because special schools have historically been housing and working with students with specific or usually single disabilities.

In our sample, special educators were teaching at schools for deaf students, students with visual impairment, and those for students with intellectual and development disabilities. As against SMSA and IEDSS respondents, special school educators were working as students' class teachers. They therefore focused on *teaching* primarily when they described their roles and responsibilities and not on *supporting*.

General teachers at general schools. Only three respondents were employed as general teachers in general schools. Along with the legitimacy accorded to special educators to apply for both regular and special teaching jobs, as we saw in Part 2, respondents who were or had taught as general teachers also pointed out that their training was useful for teaching both 'general' and 'special' students.

Caregivers at Buniyad Kendras. Three respondents from Bihar were appointed as caregivers at Buniyad Kendras. These kendras are 'social care service centres' set up under the State Society for Ultra Poor and Social Welfare (SSUPSW), Department of Social Welfare and supported by the World Bank. They have been set up at the district and sub-divisional levels to provide "care, support and rehabilitation services" to older persons, widows and persons with disabilities. The centres were aimed to provision services ranging from therapy and counselling to legal aid and emergency outreach (World Bank, n.d., p. 21).

It is for these purposes that personnel such as psychologists, physiotherapists, audiologist-cum-speech language pathologists and other technicians have been hired for each centre. Special educators, from any disability specialisation, can apply for the position of 'case managers' and 'caregivers'. While the recruitment advertisement mentions that they are supposed to "provide care and support services to target beneficiaries in the Buniyad Center" (SSUPSW, n.d.), respondents complained that the job was inconsistent with their training. A caregiver from Bhagalpur district pointed out that they were just "asked to stay with the case manager and make entries on the [computer] system and then go to camps".

3.3. Perceptions about job roles: Relations with the student, the parent and the general educator

3.3.1. Paying attention and guiding students

Many respondents talked about general teachers lacking the training in special education and the knowledge and skills acquired as a result (for instance, teaching using the Braille script, creating a classroom environment including using certain equipment such as group hearing aids, learning to teach daily living skills to students with an intellectual disability etc.). But they also stated that being able to "pay (special) attention", guiding and putting "extra effort" with their students was a key role performed by special educators and a requirement to work with students with specific disabilities. Some of them went on to add, and as has been pointed out in earlier studies (Astha, 2017; Rao et al., 2020; Singal, 2019), that

general teachers are usually unable to perform this role because of their wider job responsibilities which includes taking care of a large class size and the burden of administrative and non-teaching duties.³⁸ Special school educators differentiated their work setting with a smaller class size on this basis.

Depending upon where they were appointed, educators articulated the point on paying attention in different ways. For instance, SMSA itinerant teachers informed that they ask the general class teachers to give special attention to their student by ensuring that the student is seated in the first row; and they guide parents and the general teachers on ways to understand the student's issues. As one respondent trained in visual impairment from Buxar, Bihar put it, "we basically adjust the communication between the teacher and the student".

Importantly, special educators under both SMSA and IEDSS pointed out that the general teacher was at the centre of the teaching process while they (special educators) were present to guide the students, parents and teachers. The IEDSS educators reported that they were teaching students with specific disabilities during their activity or free periods while otherwise the students were "integrated", as one respondent stated, in the general classroom and came to them only for extra support. One IEDSS educator from Pune, Maharashtra explained the guiding process as follows:

We basically hold discussions with the students...We have a resource room, where students come to us as per their needs. They come to us for guidance and counselling and if they do not understand some lesson, we also teach them that. For example, the student will tell us that we were taught this Hindi poem in class yesterday, and we didn't understand it. So, we'll study their problem and teach them that lesson; we'll solve their problem.

Perhaps due to the focus on guidance and teaching support, a respondent from Bhagalpur, Bihar, claimed the teacher training did not prepare him to follow the schooling syllabus: "The training course has helped... in terms of the teaching method, but...it does not match at all with the CBSE board syllabus".

In relation to support at the cluster level, a few SMSA respondents pointed out that parents usually asked them to pay more attention to their child. For instance, one SMSA resource teacher from Begusarai, Bihar, mentioned that parents would ask him to visit their child twice in a week instead of the monthly visits that he was otherwise able to make and were also willing to pay for that.

3.3.2. Awareness among parents/guardians

Many educators highlighted the importance of parents' awareness and support in the inclusion process, especially because their student pool was from rural, lower-income households. They indicated that education access and especially outcomes could be improved if parents were relatively educated, or by increasing their awareness level about their child's support needs. It may be noted here that 42.2% of women and 21.5% of men were not literate in Bihar,³⁹ as per Phase 1 of the 2019-20 round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). Whereas, the respective figures are 15.4% and 7% for Maharashtra.

SMSA respondents from both states also mentioned that they are supposed to conduct training programmes

³⁸ The Bihar SMSA itinerant teachers have recently been asked to specifically oversee the progress of 30 students (20 school-going kids and 10 who are only able to learn under the much criticised home-based education model) over a year in their block through IEPs.

³⁹ NHFS-5 defines literate persons as those who have completed class 9 or higher and who can read a whole sentence or part of a sentence.

for parents to enable them to support their child more actively.⁴⁰

The box below presents the case of Surya, a respondent with visual impairment who ended up benefitting from the schooling system he got access to. Surya's case could be called unique. While he mentioned that his parents ended up sending him to school because they did not know what other work he would be able to do, their decision to educate him is now benefitting him as well as his family.

Surya's* Case

One of our respondents from Bihar, Surya, is presently a trainer at a teacher training institute and is also waiting for his TGT (Trained Graduate Teacher) post interview with the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti. Although he was motivated to enter the special education field because of the employment options it presented, his other aim was to learn more about his disability which is visual impairment. The extracts below refer to those parts of our conversation where he spoke about his education years and their impact.

Most students pursuing D.Ed. [Special Education] come from normal schools, and many of them are from rural backgrounds. They are not able to fathom that a V.I. person [person with visual impairment] can even teach. So, when they see me, they are glad and are motivated to do more; even the confidence of even those with visual impairment is boosted...If I talk about my case, I am the most educated in my family. Others are working here and there; someone is working as a labourer, someone as a mistry...I studied in a special school till class V. I then completed the rest of my schooling in a normal school. My university, Jagadguru Rambhadracharya Divyanga University, Uttar Pradesh, too was for disabled students. That's when I got to know about other disabled students that is students with hearing impairment, mental retardation [intellectual disability]; I had also already visited Dr. Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University. So, I knew how other students learnt and communicated. Then I completed a course in Bangalore. That is where I got to know that I could communicate with H.I. students [students with hearing impairment] using android phone messaging....

....A person with physical disability may be able to do farming, labour work etc. and are pushed into such work. But the family will see someone like me and think that he is not/will not be able to do anything, so let us make him study; he'll at least be able to eat and stay in the school premises itself (*padha hi do issue achha jo ki apna khayega, peeyega; school mein pada rahega*). But such a situation has made the person positive (*sakaratmak*). Now, people go out and do physical labour while I am sitting here and teaching because I have studied more. So, where is my visual impairment? My visual impairment is hiding now. My disability does not matter here now, right. Yes, I am disabled when you look at me, but when it comes to work, that person becomes disabled who is roaming around and working. They sent me thinking that I would not be able to do anything...but now other children are also being sent to school looking at my case...I can now use a phone and computer and now people understand that I was sent for the right reason. I got this other child with visual impairment enrolled in the same school that I studied in for primary schooling...The child will not be able to know the problem; the child is just a child whether disabled or non-disabled...it is the parent and teacher who will have to learn, right?

*The respondent's name has been anonymised.

⁴⁰ The Bihar Education Project Council website also mentions that '...volunteers should be appointed on contractual basis at cluster/ gram panchayat level from the family/parent of children with disabilities'.

An important point to take away from Surya's narration may be that his parents' decision to send him to school and what he learnt from the available schooling and then higher education system, notwithstanding their limitations, came to his rescue.

Special school educators' views were not dissimilar. One Maharashtra special school teacher from our preliminary observations who was trained in deaf education argued that the difference in guardians' awareness levels was one reason why students in her school for deaf students found it difficult to attend general schools:

People in rural areas would not be able to give much attention... whereas those from educated families and urban areas have been relatively aware. Their children could go to normal schools... So, in our experience, the children who have gone to normal schools return back. If a child joins a regular school in nursery class and then comes to us in class three or four, we realise that they are not even well-verses with lessons taught in nursery class. So, they will have to be admitted in a special school first, and they could then graduate to a regular school.

Similarly, one SMSA BRP from Sangli, Maharashtra reported that they help kids to join special schools in the neighbourhood. A study conducted in Madhya Pradesh too had pointed towards the value that young people with disabilities who had grown up in low resource and education households placed on learning in special schools due to the present issues in mainstream school settings (Singal, 2014, pp. 215–216).

3.3.3.Teaching and supporting students across disabilities

With respect to their teaching roles, or interactions with students with disabilities, SMSA special educators suggested they had to look after the support requirements of many children in their cluster or block, and across disabilities. Interestingly, while these educators pointed out general teachers' limitations in teaching and supporting students with different disabilities, especially the disability that they had specialised in through their degree, they also revealed their own limitations in teaching students with disabilities other than the ones they had specialised in. On being probed further about her five-day multi-disability training, a resource teacher from Buxar, Bihar said:

We have done multi-disability training for this [supporting students with other disabilities]...yes, we won't be able to do this in five days, but the general teachers...don't even know how many disabled students there are in their school; we at least know this much. We are also taught about other disabilities in our course. Though I don't know so deeply, I surely know more than the general teacher.

While she acknowledged that efforts to transition from special to general education were underway, at the same time, she voiced the employment concerns of individuals like her who got trained in special education courses.

Meanwhile, a BRP from Nanded, Maharashtra suggested that he was in fact able to teach children across disability categories due to completing a 15-day "multi-training programme" that was conducted by the Maharashtra Prathamik Shikshan Parishad after he joined. Similarly, on being asked about teaching students with other disabilities, a Bihar respondent who is presently a special educator in a general school

in Gujarat pointed out that he had fortunately studied the Braille script due to his bachelor's degree in rehabilitation therapy. He completed the same before pursuing a D.Ed. Spl. Ed. in intellectual disability and added that "I am trained for a cross-disability space; I can help [students with visual impairment] at the primary [school] level".

3.4. Interaction with the RCI

3.4.1. Training and registration

Several respondents felt that it was not necessary to pursue a special education course in order to be equipped to teach students with disabilities. This seems to be consistent with findings from Madan's (2018) study in a Bengaluru school, where learning from experience and acquiring skills on the job was cited as more important for practicing inclusion, than training.

An IEDSS special educator from Pune suggested: "See, going by law, you can't teach the students, but otherwise you can teach them if you want to; you can do these shorter courses, and teach them". One BRP from Jalna, Maharashtra also highlighted that a government general teacher would not need to go through such formal courses, unless they were themselves interested to, because of the training and support available throughout the government education system.

However, since our respondents were sampled from the pool of RCI registrants, there is a greater chance that the norms and standards prescribed by the Council featured predominantly in our discussion related to training, appointment, retention and termination. Most respondents, for instance, pointed out that it was mandatory to be registered with the RCI in order to be able to work with students with disabilities in the government schooling system and also in other work settings. Importantly, being trained as a teacher and getting registered consequently gains greater relevance in case of special schools that presently do not come under the purview of the RTE Act.

For example, a special educator teaching at an orphanage-cum-special school in Mumbai, Maharashtra, stated that "the RCI has no influence" in the place that she is working:

[Being registered] is for myself, because I am an educator. I should be registered...under the law. Even if I am not trained or do not get my registration renewed, our school is not bothered about it. They just care about the fact that you are working with the kids and they are happy with your performance.

Another Mumbai special school teacher stated that the RCI plays "a significant role" as they are "made aware of a proper curriculum when we do the course with the RCI. It has personally helped me a lot". Meanwhile, a respondent from Buldhana, Maharashtra who had left the field, pointed out that many of his batch-mates did not register with the RCI because of the cost that they would entail without any attached benefits.

3.4.2. Re-registration and continuing education

Respondents specified following the mandatory collection of CRE programme points every five years to be able to re-register with the RCI. Many respondents felt that these programmes were useful for staying updated on new methods as well as to refresh their knowledge.

Several respondents from both states however, had not attended any of these programmes due to their physical inaccessibility or attached costs, or because of lack of information about these programmes.⁴¹ Respondents reported that CRE programmes were not conducted in their districts, and required travel to larger towns and cities. Further, educators across work settings wanted the RCI to conduct CRE programmes free of cost or at minimal charges.

Consistent with previous studies, SMSA itinerant teachers highlighted many challenges with the linkage of CRE programmes to the registration renewal process. For instance, Bihar SMSA educators had not been allowed to take paid leave for attending these programmes. Due to the Council's intervention in the past few years, as a few respondents informed us, they are now allowed a maximum of five paid leaves annually for this purpose. A resource teacher from Buxar, Bihar also suggested that SMSA in-service training relevant to rehabilitation education could be recognised as CRE programmes so that educators do not have to fulfil the CRE requirement separately. This could also solve the issue of taking extra leaves for attending CRE programmes. Although these processes may seem insignificant in the broader education process, respondents reported that not getting registered or re-registered within a stipulated time period could invite suspension or termination from their teaching duty.

Meanwhile, respondents who had not attended any CRE programmes primarily included those who had only recently graduated, and those not employed in teaching. The latter suggested that they found no use in attending the programmes as there were no job vacancies, and thus would not re-register with the RCI.

3.4.3.Entering and leaving the field: A dearth of special educators?

3.4.3.1. Motivation was to get a job

A majority of respondents reported pursuing courses in special education due to being informed that they would be able to secure employment, specifically government jobs. They had got to know about the special education field from somebody they knew—friends, seniors in school or college, a teacher or someone in their family or neighbourhood who had pursued a similar course. Importantly, several Maharashtra respondents mentioned that their family members or relatives had themselves started special schools or they had started working in a special school prior to the special education training. On being asked how he got to know about special education courses, a special school manager-cum-educator from Jalgaon district narrated the following:

I was working with an NGO; that is how I gained interest in the field of special education...I then completed a D.Ed. in M.R. [intellectual disability]. This was a special school started by my friend's brother. I had joined there for a job after my graduation. Since the founder wanted to close down the school because of funding issues and paucity of time, I took over [as the manager].

Many, from Bihar in particular, also cited the possibility of becoming a general teacher as a reason to pursue the course. A respondent with a physical disability from Banka district who now operates a kirana shop mentioned the following: "I did not have any knowledge of special education prior to [its introduction by a person in my village]. I was told about the Supreme Court order that two special educators have to be appointed in each school; I got trained on that basis..." As one respondent put it, there was a "double-benefit" in doing special education as against general education courses because of the larger pool of jobs

⁴¹ In fact, some of the respondents decided to keep in touch in order to receive information on job vacancies, changes in provisions for special educator appointment and the conduct of CRE programmes.

once could apply for. In fact, some respondents pursued special education courses post their training in general education, due to these potential job opportunities. It was also added that they entered the field to work towards bettering the situation of children with different disabilities, or to do social work in the process of teaching.

Lastly, a few of our respondents had pursued special education courses as add-on qualifications to bolster their job opportunities in rehabilitation. They had done courses such as a Bachelor in Rehabilitation Therapy (BRT), a Diploma in Hearing, Language and Speech (DHLS) prior to pursuing a course in special education. We came across these movements during our preliminary observations in Jammu and Kashmir and Chhattisgarh as well. A BRP from Bhagalpur, Bihar explained the usefulness of doing a DHLS in the following manner:

The advantage...is that you can apply for two kinds of jobs viz. (a) resource centre jobs (that is, for the post of an assistant audiologist) under the SSA in case you complete the one-year DHLS course and you could go for (b) special teaching jobs in case you complete the six-month special education add-on course also.

3.4.3.2. No government vacancies released

Given that most respondents were seeking government jobs after completing their special education courses, they reported being frustrated that not enough job vacancies were made available. In both states, respondents complained that no SMSA resource person vacancies had been released since 2012-13. While special education courses have been given equivalence with general education courses, only three of our respondents were employed in such positions. Some respondents who were no longer in the field were not aware that they could apply for general teaching posts, while others who were aware complained of the additional barrier of passing the Teacher Eligibility Tests (TETs) in order to be eligible to apply for these posts.

The lack of vacancies seems problematic even from the viewpoint of those employed as RPs under the SMSA, who felt that there was a need to appoint more mobile teachers. The resource teacher from Buxar, Bihar asked: “Where are the human resources if there are three teachers in one block? There should be a special educator in each school”. She also pointed out that the number of SMSA special educators was falling because of salary issues: “Now I am 42. Those in their 40s are the ones who are working [as special education resource persons]; the new generation is not interested”.

At the same time, a general teacher from Khagaria, Bihar indicated the subsumption of special education into general education: “general and special [education] have already become one and the same. They have only been doing paper work under the Bihar SSA since 2012 as far as special education is concerned, but nothing is there on the surface”.

3.4.3.3. Terms of employment and beyond

The government sector

Consistent with earlier documentation (Rao et al., 2020), itinerant teachers employed under SMSA complained of the significant, and unfair, disparity in remuneration for special and general teachers, and about the contractual nature of their jobs. They further suggested their salaries were disproportionate to the actual work they were responsible for and carried out. The Khagaria general teacher who earlier used to work as an RP had shifted to general teaching in a government school for these very reasons. Adding to the

work burden and unfair employment terms, a BRP from Bhojpur, Bihar stated that “if they keep doing this to special educators, they are harming disabled students’ future. No one will want to be associated with this profession, get trained in it”. Given that SMSA is to be implemented using both Central and State Government funds, he pointed out that the Government of Bihar was not contributing enough towards their salaries. It is also important to note that both regular and special SMSA resource persons in at least Maharashtra were working on lower salary contracts as compared to those of general teachers who were working on a permanent basis.

As regards special educators in general schools, a respondent who was posted under the IEDSS scheme (earlier under the RMSA and now the SMSA) in Nashik, Maharashtra reported: “we don’t receive our payments regularly; there are gaps of 4-6 months”.

The private sector

Finally, on being asked why they had not pursued opportunities in private- or NGO-run schools, many respondents in Bihar suggested that they would prefer to or were actively trying to acquire government job roles rather than pursue jobs in private or NGO-run special schools. They reported such preference primarily due to (i) fewer opportunities in the private schooling sector, and (ii) lower remunerations offered in private jobs (not greater than Rs. 8000-9000 per month). Many pointed out that there were very few special schools, and even private general schools, in the rural locations that they were based out of. This finding might be associated with the lower share of respondents from Bihar in our sample who were working as special educators (5%, that is 2 out of 41), and the high share of respondents in Bihar based in rural areas (62%). A respondent from rural Bihar reported: “I did not apply to private institutes. I am in Madhubani district where you will not find any private institutes. The nearest school is in Muzaffarpur and the next is in Patna”.

Respondents from Maharashtra, while a majority were employed in special schools, also agreed that remunerations in these schools were lower than what government jobs might offer. A respondent from Pune who had left the field spoke about experiences of his peers who were now working in NGO-run special schools:

They are working in different fields, some are working in NGOs where there is one single person managing everything in the school, and they don’t have proper land for the school; they are not paying them [my peers] any salaries. I did not want this type of situation.

Additionally, many Maharashtra respondents who had engaged with special schools spoke about the issue of bribery. Government grant special schools, they pointed out, were asking for lakhs of rupees as donation from applicants in order to get appointed as permanent teachers under these schools. An educator who now takes tuitions in Pune told that he was not trying to join any school because “here [grant schools] people are asking for 10-20 lakh rupees to give a job”. The ‘issue’ of special schools increasingly closing down was also mentioned. At least five Maharashtra respondents reported the special school in which they were working had closed down, with one citing the coronavirus pandemic as a reason.

It would be useful to examine if this closing down of special schools is a result of a positive transition where the state is receding from actively spending on special school settings. At the same time, it is crucial to go deeper into the constraints that states are facing in recruiting more special educators in general schools, either at the cluster or school level, and training general teachers, and how that is affecting students’ learning in the general education system in this transitional phase.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings from this study present a view that special teaching and learning in case of students with disabilities is in a state of flux and has transitioned considerably from the time of the RCI's institution to the present situation today. Interviews with special educators in Bihar and Maharashtra suggest that we are currently in a "multi-track" stage of education development as far as students with disabilities are concerned. This is similar to the conclusion drawn from a study of Lesotho's "inclusive schooling" policy (Urwick & Elliott, 2010) and consistent with consultations during the course of this study. This may be understood as a stage where the inclusion process is constitutive of specialised education and training, as well as provisioning of teaching and guidance support within the regular schooling system where the general teacher is also being trained. Special educators understand these multiple tracks from the viewpoint of employment options they have. They are entering, shifting between work settings, and leaving the field as per changes taking place in this multi-track stage.

In the case of the above two states, job opportunities in the government schooling system are currently limited to general teaching positions, since itinerant teachers and school-based special educators are not being recruited. At the same time, the terms of employment are unfavourable in both NGO-run special schools and itinerant teaching. As a result, educators are moving to options such as self-employment including providing tuitions, or taking up work positions at Buniyad Centres in Bihar. Only few are employed as general teachers in government and private-unaided schools.

Within this context, those employed as itinerant teachers and special educators in general schools acknowledge that the training they pursued and their work is to only add to general classroom teaching and direct students to other government support schemes including aids and appliances. However, respondents, especially those working in special schools, and also itinerant teachers, continue to find this inclusion approach limiting due to the existing systemic challenges - including large class sizes and administrative work, and the lack of vacancies in SMSA itinerant teaching. Special educators also pointed towards their own limitations in teaching students with different disabilities. Several respondents also brought up the concerns of parents regarding the amount of attention their children could receive, as well as the importance of parents' awareness regarding their child's needs. Based on the primary data collected through our interviews with special educators, we raise the following questions and issues with the RCI.

4.1. On CRE use, access and linkage with the registration process

Although special educator respondents agreed that CRE programmes were useful for refreshing as well as updating their knowledge in their field of study and/or to learn about new methods of teaching and classroom management, there is a need for the RCI to re-examine the mandated registration renewal process and its linkage with attending continuing education programmes. Not only did some respondents report that institutions were engaging in malpractices for issuing CRE programme certificates, the registration renewal process and delays in the same may act as additional hurdles in being meaningfully employed. Government and government-grant school educators especially mentioned the possibility of suspension or termination of services in case they did not get re-registered. One of the respondents also pointed out that there was a need for a system through which they could get feedback on their learned and acquired teaching methods. This apart, the following recommendations are in order:

1. Because continuing education is presently linked with registration renewal i.e. it is mandatory to collect 100 CRE points for renewing one's registration with the RCI, the CRE point-based programmes should be conducted free of cost or at minimal registration fee. Respondents requested that national institutes should conduct more such programmes, or programme fee should be monitored by the Council if they are conducted by NGOs or private institutions.
2. Access to information on continuing education programmes as well as physical inaccessibility was a major challenge, especially for respondents employed and/or residing in rural and remote areas. It is therefore recommended that CRE programmes
 - i. Be increasingly conducted through the online mode (as the coronavirus pandemic has also necessitated), where possible without compromising on quality of the programmes.
 - ii. Be offered by institutes in remote regions or be conducted for a group of districts so that the programmes are physically accessible and their content is situated in the local context. The latter may specifically be directed to Zonal Coordination Committees under the RCI, keeping in view one of their main objectives which is to develop courses that are suitable to the region's needs (RCI, 2006, p. 24).

4.2. Training and awareness-creation

The RPD Act defines inclusive education as a system wherein students with and without disability learn together and with suitable adaptations to make such learning possible. Additionally, the Act also provides children with benchmark disability, i.e. those with equal to or over 40% of a specified disability, the right to choose between a neighbourhood school and a special school for undertaking education. Although the RCI has been revising teacher education curriculum in line with these changes brought by the RPD Act in understanding education, the following are a few suggestions as regards pre-service and in-service training and sensitisation:

1. The National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP) mentions that "awareness and knowledge of...teach[ing] children with specific disabilities (including learning disabilities) will be an integral part of all teacher education programmes, along with gender sensitization and sensitization towards all underrepresented groups" (Para 6.14). Following from the NEP, pre-service and in-service sensitisation and training modules on inclusive education should necessarily extend to taking into account disadvantages due to one's caste, religion, gender, sexual orientation and economic position, apart from disability, and how these intersect with one's disability.
2. In line with Section 16(iv)-(v) and (vii) of the RPD Act for enabling inclusive education and the Memorandums of Understanding between the NCTE and RCI in the past, there is an urgent need to consider how degree and training courses can be directed to general teachers in a more frequent and meaningful way so that they are prepared to work with all students, including those with disabilities, in the long-term. One way may be that general education courses while also laying down the importance of providing focused teaching support to both disabled and non-disabled students and in the appropriate modes of communication could be followed by specialisation courses in teaching students with specific disabilities.

At the same time, it is important to build the capacity of individuals already trained in special education and those working with students with different disabilities such as SMSA itinerant teachers.

While respondents employed under the SMSA reported undergoing cross-disability training programmes, there is a need for the RCI to actively consult with and understand teaching experiences of both general teachers and special educators (including special educators who are now working as general teachers) to (i) review appropriateness of degree and training courses offered; (ii) create a feedback mechanism for educators; and (iii) ensure that general and special educators work in collaboration rather than in silos.

4.3. Why are special educators leaving the education field?

Section 17(c) of the RPD Act asks appropriate governments and authorities to "train and employ teachers, including teachers with disability who are qualified in sign language and Braille and also teachers who are trained in teaching children with intellectual disability". Yet, we found that about one-fifth of our respondents had left the field of education. The RCI needs to investigate why so many trained educators, who could apply for general teaching posts also, are exiting this field. Our respondents pointed towards a lack of government job vacancies in their states (especially under the SMSA) as well as unfavourable terms of employment in both the government and private sectors.

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ANNEXURE

The image below contains an updated category-wise list of registered professionals and personnel registered with the RCI. It was made available vide RTI request 5-172/RCI/RTI-3447. As per the list, a total of 1,57,951 professionals and personnel were registered as on 29 September 2020. A significant 1,19,007 of these were special teachers. We can gauge the significance of special education under the Council by also looking at the institutions that are approved by the RCI including the courses they offer. So, out of the 1,227 offered courses on 26 August 2020, 912 were in special education. These included D.Ed. Special Education, B.Ed. Special Education and M.Ed. Special Education in various disabilities, and the B.Sc. (Special Education & Rehabilitation) course.



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Total Registered Professional and Personal	157951		
Total Registered Professional	77453		
Total Registered Personal	80498		
Total number of Registered Professionals/Personnel U/S 19	Total	Professional	Personal
1. Audiologist and Speech Therapists	9692	9674	18
2. Clinical Psychologists	2221	2213	8
3. Hearing Aid and Ear Mould Technicians	30	6	24
4. Rehabilitation Engineers and Technicians	12	8	4
5. Special Teachers for Education and Training the handicapped	119007	59133	59874
6. Vocational Counsellors, Employment Officers and Placement Officers dealing with handicapped	318	316	2
7. Multipurpose Rehabilitation Therapists, Technicians	645	143	502
8. Speech Pathologists	3829	317	3512
9. Rehabilitation Psychologists	2450	2374	76
10. Rehabilitation Social Workers	675	601	74
11. Rehabilitation Practitioners in Mental Retardation	213	206	7
12. Orientation and Mobility Specialists	263	95	168
13. Community Based Rehabilitation Professionals	1720	180	1540
14. Rehabilitation Counsellors/Administrators	366	363	3
15. Prosthetists and Orthotists	2451	1354	1097
16. Rehabilitation Workshop Managers	7	3	4
17. Others	330	211	13052

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