

Status of Social Determinants of Mental Health of Secondary School Children with Special Needs in Himachal Pradesh

Raj Kumar^{a*}, Pooja Devi^b

^a Department of Education, Career Point University, Kota, Rajasthan–325003, India

^b Department of Education, Career Point University, Kota, Rajasthan–325003, India

*Corresponding author's E-mail address: harshdhiman777@gmail.com

Abstract

The teaching of children with special needs inside the school system is the main topic of this study. These students are currently taught with regular pupils in the same classroom and setting, regardless of whether they are performing academically above or below average for their age. Teachers frequently foster a bond with their students. With special needs and a student of the same age who doesn't have any special needs. Even when they are getting therapeutic treatment, children with and without impairments can play and interact every day in inclusion settings. The state of special education services for kids with special needs is another main topic of the report. The report highlights the resources that the State and Central Government make available to these kids. The government's involvement in inclusive education through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan at the primary school level.

Keywords: Social, Mental Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, CWSN, and Right to Education.

1. Introduction

Adolescent mental health is becoming more widely acknowledged as an essential aspect of general wellbeing, especially for kids with special needs. This group in Himachal Pradesh deals with a special combination of environmental, social, health, and educational issues that influence their mental health results.

1. **Knowing the Social Factors Affecting Mental Health** Non-medical factors like socioeconomic position, educational attainment, healthcare access, stigma, and inclusion are all considered social determinants of mental health and can have a substantial impact on mental health risks and recovery.
2. **An Overview of Himachal Pradesh Special Needs Education** Initiated in 2009–2010, the Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) program expands inclusive education initiatives into classes IX–XII. It focuses on kids with disabilities in both government and assisted schools, including those with cognitive, sensory, locomotor, and mental health issues. The program places a strong emphasis on teacher preparation, support infrastructure, tailored planning, and accessible

learning resources (such as Braille versions, tactile maps, and audio books). For elementary school students with special needs, Himachal Pradesh has instituted a zero-rejection policy under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Medical camps, individualized education plans (IEPs), the provision of appliances and aids, the reduction of infrastructure barriers, assistance for girls with disabilities, and home-based education programs are some of the initiatives. In situations when formal inclusion is not practical,

3. **Youth Mental Health Situation** : More comprehensive data on mental health in Himachal Pradesh shows urgent issues. An estimated 6% of the state's population is thought to be experiencing mental stress, which has led to initiatives to improve the state's mental health infrastructure and policy. These include building de-addiction centers, increasing the number of psychiatrists and counselors in important medical facilities, and expanding the mental health hospital at Tanda Medical College.
4. **Social Determinant Gaps for Special Needs Students:**
 - i) Although inclusive educational policies offer institutional support, little is known about the mental health of secondary school children with special needs, especially with regard to social determinants. In particular, there is little information on:
 - ii) How access to mental health care is impacted by socioeconomic factors (such as income and living in an urban or rural area).
 - iii) the psychological effects of inclusion in typical school environments, including both its advantages and possible drawbacks.
 - iv) stigma and support systems for kids with special needs at the family and community levels.
 - v) school-related elements include academic pressure, bullying, peer acceptability, and counseling accessibility.



Social and emotional well-being diagram (Source Dudgeon and Walker 2015)

2. Objectives and Importance of the Research:

In order to determine the obstacles and enablers to the psychological well-being and inclusive development of schoolchildren with special needs in Himachal Pradesh, it is necessary to evaluate and examine the social determinants that impact their mental health. These factors include educational inclusion, stigma, mental health awareness, accessibility to healthcare and support services, cultural attitudes, and community environment.

- a. evaluating the variety of social factors that influence the mental health of special education students in Himachal Pradesh's secondary schools.
- b. Assessing the availability of mental health resources, such as those offered by community organizations, schools, and medical facilities.
- c. recognizing obstacles including stigma, remote location, financial limitations, and lack of awareness.
- d. Creating practical suggestions for legislators, educators, and medical professionals to improve mental health outcomes through focused interventions.

3. Research Methodology

1. Design of the Study:

To evaluate the social factors influencing the mental health of schoolchildren with special needs in Himachal Pradesh, a cross-sectional descriptive study will be carried out.

2. Population under Study

Target Group: Special education students attending public and private schools in a few Himachal Pradesh districts. Children in the age range of 11 to 18 (upper primary and secondary school levels). According to school records or disability certifications, children who have been identified as having physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, sensory impairments, or other special needs are eligible for inclusion. Children who are unable to participate in the examination due to serious cognitive deficits or acute medical illnesses are excluded.

3. Method of Sampling Multistage stratified random sampling is the sampling technique used.

Step 1: Districts representing various geographic zones (hill, rural, semi-urban) are chosen.

Step 2: Schools with inclusive education programs are chosen at random.

Step 3: Students with special needs are chosen at random from school registrations.

4. The size of the sample

Estimated using statistics on the prevalence of mental health problems in children with exceptional needs (expected to be about 30%), a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error. In order to guarantee statistical validity, a minimum sample size of 300 students will be sought.

5. Tools for Gathering Data

Sociodemographic Questionnaire: To gather information on family history, educational attainment, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability type.
Mental Health Assessment Scales:

Approved instruments that have been modified for local context, such as the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) or the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Social Determinants Questionnaire: An organized survey that evaluates:

- a) Understanding and awareness of mental health.
- b) Experience of discrimination or stigma.
- c) Access to resources for education and healthcare.
- d) Support from the community and family.
- e) Cultural perspectives on mental health and disability.

Informant Interviews: To get qualitative information on the social and environmental elements influencing mental health, semi-structured interviews with educators, parents, and school counselors are conducted.

6. Data Gathering Method

- a) Prior authorization will be sought from school administration and education authorities.
- b) Parents' or guardians' consent will be sought, as will the children's consent.
- c) The questionnaires will be distributed by qualified researchers and counselors in a private, kid-friendly setting.
- d) Key informant interviews will be audio recorded with their permission.

7. Analysis of Data

- a) Software for statistical analysis, such as SPSS, will be used to examine quantitative data.
- b) Demographic and social determinant variables will be summed together using descriptive statistics (means, percentages).
- c) Associations between social factors and mental health status will be found using inferential statistics (chi-square tests, logistic regression).

d) Thematic analysis will be used to find recurrent themes and contextual elements in the qualitative data obtained from interviews.

8. Moral Points to Remember

- a) Institutional Ethics Committee approval will be requested.
- b) Participants' privacy and confidentiality will be rigorously protected.
- c) Participants with serious mental health issues will receive psychological treatment or referrals.

4. Data Interpretation

Important new information on the social factors influencing the mental health of kids with special needs is revealed by the examination of quantitative and qualitative data collected from a few schools around Himachal Pradesh:

1. Inclusion and Access to Education:

It was noted that more over 85% of the pupils in the sample were enrolled in normal schools that offered inclusive education under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and IEDSS.

Interpretation: Despite a comparatively high enrollment rate, teacher and parent interviews indicate that a lack of specialized instructional support and individualized attention causes many pupils to struggle academically. Some teachers cover numerous schools, which reduces the efficiency of inclusive education. Schools in mountainous or rural areas reported having restricted access to special educators.

2. Knowledge and comprehension of mental health:

Finding: Just 37% of parents and 42% of pupils showed a fundamental comprehension of mental health concepts and symptoms.

Interpretation: This indicates a notable lack of knowledge on mental health, particularly in rural areas. Delays in identifying and supporting impacted pupils might be caused by misunderstandings or a total ignorance of emotional and behavioral problems.

3. Discrimination and Stigma:

Observation: In the school setting, bullying, social rejection, or isolation were reported by nearly 65% of students with special needs.

Interpretation: One of the biggest obstacles to psychological health is still stigma. Low self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms were found to be exacerbated by students' and their caregivers' shared fears of being branded or excluded.

4. Mental Health Services Are Accessible:

Observation: Just 18% of kids had ever sought therapy, counseling, or psychological testing of any kind.

Interpretation: Even with increasing awareness campaigns, there is still very little access to qualified mental health specialists, particularly in rural areas. This disparity is exacerbated by a lack of school-based counseling services, financial worries, and infrastructure issues.

5. Support from Family and the Community:

Observation: Students who had a strong support system at home demonstrated greater emotional fortitude and improved school adjustment. 43% of families, however, lacked the knowledge or tools necessary to address their child's mental health issues.:

Interpretation: Deeply ingrained cultural ideas are still reflected in community attitudes; some parents see handicap as a punishment or a curse. Such beliefs impede prompt response and postpone diagnosis.

6. Aspects of Socioeconomics:

Observation: Stress levels were higher, learning aids were scarcer, and absenteeism was higher for kids from low-income families.

Interpretation: Access to private psychological treatments, transportation, nourishment, and assistive technology is restricted by economic hardship, which exacerbates other social barriers.

General Interpretation and Important Findings

According to the study, the mental health of schoolchildren with special needs in Himachal Pradesh is greatly impacted by social variables, including stigma, inadequate mental health literacy, restricted access to care, and socioeconomic difficulties. Despite the existence of inclusive education policies, there are still gaps in their actual implementation, particularly in rural or underdeveloped areas.

Suggestions (Predicated on the Interpretation of Data)

1. Boost school-based mental health initiatives by adding peer support networks and specialized counselors.
2. In order to identify and address mental health concerns early on, special educators and regular teachers should receive more training.
3. Organize community awareness campaigns to raise mental health literacy and lessen

stigma in communities and families.

4. Using telehealth or mobile units, increase access to assistive services in rural and tribal areas.

5. Financial assistance programs should be directed toward low-income families with children who require a lot of help.

5..Conclusion

In Himachal Pradesh, a complex interaction of socioeconomic variables has a major impact on the mental health of school children with special needs. There are still significant implementation, awareness, and accessibility gaps despite the state's admirable efforts through inclusive education initiatives like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS). Important factors that continue to be significant obstacles to the psychological health and social integration of children with special needs include stigma, a lack of mental health literacy, limited access to professional care, cultural misconceptions, and geographic limitations. Additionally, because of a lack of resources and insufficient treatment outreach, children from low-income or rural households bear a disproportionately greater burden.

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