

Reaching Children with Disabilities through ODL : Innovating through the Certificate Programme in Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion (Cerebral Palsy)

The Certificate Programme in Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion (Cerebral Palsy) is the first of its kind that was developed at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for training personnel to provide education and intervention to children with cerebral palsy. This innovative programme in the sector of disability was developed by the Faculty of Child Development in the School of Continuing Education at IGNOU in collaboration with the Rehabilitation Council of India. The innovation in the Certificate Programme was in terms of programme concept, instructional design, programme content (curriculum and self-learning materials), eligibility requirements and the target group addressed.

Introduction

The Certificate Programme in Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion (Cerebral Palsy) is a national level programme, which is the first of its kind with no precedent either in the face-to-face mode or the ODL mode that helps to create trained personnel to provide education and intervention to children with cerebral palsy during the period from birth to six years. The minimum qualification to enroll in the programme is successful completion of class 10th examination from a recognised Board with a minimum of 50 per cent marks. It is a 24 credit Certificate Programme of one year duration, which can be completed within three years. The Certificate Programme is innovative and unique on many fronts – in terms of programme concept, instructional design, programme content (syllabus/curriculum and self-learning materials), eligibility requirements and target group addressed. Each of these aspects of innovation has been described further in the following sections.

Background of the Innovation

The faculty of Child Development in the School of Continuing Education was the first faculty to initiate programmes of study in the sector of disability in 2001. Awareness-cum-Training packages meant for the parents and family members of persons with disabilities were developed as a part of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), New Delhi and IGNOU in 2001. These packages were developed over the period 2001-2008 in a phased manner in four disability areas, namely visual impairment, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy and hearing impairment. The objective of these packages was to empower the parents and family members with the requisite knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills for fostering the multifaceted development of their children with disabilities, leading to their inclusion in various aspects of family and community life. The content adopted a lifespan approach to disability in the right perspective, with a special focus on enhancing the child's development during the first six years. A feedback study, where data were collected from the organisations implementing the packages for IGNOU as well as the learners themselves, showed that these packages were found to be highly useful by the parents and family members. The participants of the feedback study expressed the view that the packages had helped the parents to understand their child better; they learnt appropriate methods of teaching their young child activities of daily living and ways of fostering development across domains; they experienced a change in their attitudes and

behaviour towards their child and could also bring about a positive change in their child's behaviour; and they developed a confidence in their ability to look after the child and in their child's ability to learn.

However, since these were non-credit packages, these did not provide the learners with certification, which would enable them to enter the job market in the disability sector, though they effectively developed the competencies of the parents and family members to look after their children and to foster their all-round development. The target group of these packages, i.e. the parents, had spent the early years of their adulthood looking after their child and, consequently, had not been able to upgrade their qualifications for the job market. They now wanted to acquire professional qualifications to enter the arena of work but the formal system of education was closed to them, both because of age bar and lack of adequate qualifications. So on the one hand, the positive response of the parents and family members to these Awareness-cum-Training packages provided a strong evidence for the necessity of preparing Programmes of study addressing the age group birth to six years in the content. On the other hand, the strong motivation of the parents and family members to initiate a career in the field of disability spurred the faculty to strive for creating programmes of study that would support the aspirations of this sector of the population that could not access the face-to-face system. Research in the area of disability has shown that the most powerful change agents are the people who themselves have been affected by disability, which includes the persons with disabilities themselves and their parents and family members. Thus, developing a credited Programme of study in the sector of disability having the young child as its subject matter seemed to fulfill multiple objectives stated below. These were also the motivations for the faculty's efforts in this direction :

The programme of study would be in line with the thrust of IGNOU to develop programmes of study for disadvantaged and marginalised and reach the unreached.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, Government of India (1995/2016) and international rights-based declarations and conventions (UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1992 and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) stress equality of opportunity and access in all spheres for persons with disabilities. This equality cannot be achieved unless children with disabilities are given opportunities to grow to their full potential from the earliest years of their life. Further, neuroscience research had established the critical importance of early years in the development of an individual. A Programme of study, which has the development of young children as its content would serve these purposes.

The Programme of study would serve to open avenues for employment for population groups who could not access the face-to-face system due to age and qualification bars.

The Creative Process

The creative process for this innovation began with the conduct of the feedback study on the implementation of the Awareness-cum-Training packages mentioned above. Once the usefulness of the packages and the need to upgrade them into a credited programme of study was established through the feedback study, the next step was to obtain the permission of the RCI to develop credited programmes of study in the four disability areas, since it is the statutory body that regulates and monitors services given to persons with disabilities, standardises syllabi and

maintains a Central Rehabilitation Register of all qualified professionals and personnel working in the field of Rehabilitation and Special Education. It is mandatory to register with the RCI to practice in the field of disability as well as get its approval for the launch of courses in the sector.

The feedback of the Awareness-cum-Training packages in disability served as a needs analysis document for the creation of the Certificate Programme. While identifying the gap in the existing programmes – both in the face-to-face mode and distance education – in the disability sector, it was clear that there was a need for a programme of study that would focus on the early childhood years.

The formal report of the feedback study was submitted to the RCI and this served as a needs analysis document forming the basis for discussions conducted over a two year period, regarding the desirability of developing a programme of study pitched at 10th class pass as the eligibility criteria and optimal all-round development of children during the birth to six years as its subject matter. The lack of such a programme in either face-to-face or distance mode was a strong factor pointing to the need to develop such a Programme. A breakthrough was achieved in 2007 when the RCI agreed in a review meeting on 'Awareness-cum-Training Package in Disability' held in August 2007 to upgrade the Awareness-cum-Training package in disability in each of the four disability areas into independent Certificate Programmes. The RCI also approved the proposal that learners successfully completing the Certificate Programmes would be recognised as qualified to register as 'Personnel: Category B' in the Central Rehabilitation Register of the RCI. Thus the creative breakthrough was achieved at two levels: recognition of the Certificate Programmes of study by RCI and recognition of the learners who successfully complete the programme.

The Certificate Programme in Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion (Cerebral Palsy) described in this article for which the Gold Medal for Innovation in Programme Design and Development was awarded by IGNOU in 2010 was the first of the four National level Certificate Programmes that were developed in the period 2009-2011.

About the Innovation

a. Description

The Certificate Programme is chiefly a print-based programme of study, as per the standard IGNOU practice. It is a 24 credit programme of one year duration, which can be completed within three years. The 24 credits are equally distributed between theory and field-based practical work. The broad aim of the Certificate Programme is to enable the learner to work as a member of an interdisciplinary team providing early intervention and education to children with cerebral palsy up to the age of 6 years in a variety of settings such as inclusive set-ups, integrated set-ups and special schools.

Course Structure

- i) Theory Component : The 12 credits of theory are transacted through two courses of 6 credits each titled '*Foundation in Early Childhood Development and Disability*' and '*Early Childhood Special Education for Children with Cerebral Palsy*' which the learner has to successfully complete by submitting assignments and appearing for term-end examinations. Thus, the non-credit Awareness-cum-Training Package in Disability (Cerebral Palsy), after changes and modifications in content, was included as a 6

credit theory course of the Certificate Programme and another 6 credits of theory Course and 12 credits of Field-based practical work in the form of Project Work were developed afresh to create the Certificate Programme. The non-credit Awareness-cum-Training Package in Disability (Cerebral Palsy), was developed by the School of Continuing Education (SOCE), IGNOU by the same Programme Coordinator as for this Certificate Programme (i.e., Prof. Rekha Sharma Sen).

- ii) Field-based Practical Work : The 12 credits of hands-on field work is further divided into 3 Projects of 4 credits each, involving working with children with cerebral palsy in three different contexts. Each Project Work is of about 3-month duration. The first Project Work requires the learner to work in a family setting where there is a child below three years of age and implement an Individualised Family Support Plan. The second Project Work requires the learner to work in a preschool/ school setting with an individual child between 3-6 years of age and implement an Individualised Education Programme. The third Project Work requires the learner to work in a preschool/ school setting with a group of children between 3-6 years of age and carry out Group Teaching.

b. Novelty

The novelty of the innovation has been explained under four heads as follows :

- i) Innovation in Programme Concept

The Certificate Programme is innovative from the point of view of the subject matter of its content: it addresses the critical age group (birth to six years) and the most vulnerable section of our population – children with disabilities. The early childhood years are the period of most rapid brain development in the lifespan of an individual and this makes the early years 'critical periods' for development of various competencies. The brain grows to almost 70 per cent of the adult size within two years of birth and within five years to about 90 per cent. These critical years are 'windows of opportunity' so that if the child receives favourable environmental inputs pertaining to health, nutrition, learning and psychosocial development, the chances of the child's brain developing to its full potential are considerably enhanced. If the environmental experiences are unfavourable and the child faces deprivations, the brain's development is negatively affected, and the 'windows of opportunity' are lost, often irreversibly. In case of children with disabilities, the early years are critical because of the plasticity of the brain. If stimulated early the brain cells next to the damaged brain cells learn to take up the functions of the damaged and dead cells. Early intervention needs to be provided to children with disabilities both at home and through the early childhood education centres. The earlier the intervention is started, the better it is. 'Early' means 'as early as possible.'

When launched in 2009 the Certificate Programme was the first of its kind comprehensive national level educational programme recognised by the statutory body RCI which equips the learner to promote the development of the child during early childhood years in all domains : cognitive, physical, motor, language, social and emotional. There is no doubt that initiatives existed in the form of short training courses for personnel working with the young child with cerebral palsy; but there was no national-level recognised programme of

study providing systematic content to promote all-round development of the child in different developmental domains, either in the face-to-face mode or the ODL mode.

ii) Innovation in Eligibility Requirements and Target group addressed

The Certificate Programme is innovative in terms of the target group for whom it is meant. An educational programme, which aims to develop a cadre of personnel to provide early intervention to children with disabilities is always a welcome step and serves a felt need of society. But the innovation here is that this RCI recognised Certificate Programme is the only such programme available for those who have minimum educational qualifications of class 10 and wish to work in the sector of disability. 70 per cent seats are reserved for family members of persons with disabilities, the persons with disabilities themselves and those with two years of work experience in this field. By doing so, the Certificate Programme promotes equity by giving a second chance to parents and family members who were unable to build their careers due to the pressures of looking after a child with a disability. Further, there are many experienced personnel working in the field who, due to their low educational qualifications, are not able to enroll in standard educational programmes offered by the face-to-face mode which does not account for prior learning and experience. A dedicated programme, which provides an avenue for this marginalised group (people with disabilities, their family members and professionals working in the sector) to upgrade their qualifications and legitimise their personal and professional life experience of handling and working with children with disabilities, is the first of its kind in the country.

iii) Innovation in Instructional Design, Syllabus and Curriculum

Working with any child with a disability requires both specialised skills and knowledge. The implication is that a programme of study must have an appropriate mix of theory and practical components. Responding to the needs of a child with cerebral palsy is even more challenging because of the multiple areas that the child needs support in and the environment that needs to change to support the child. The instructional design for the Certificate Programme, therefore, laid equal stress on theory and hands-on fieldwork. The theory courses provide detailed information regarding how to respond to and manage the child from the first day of birth to promoting the optimal development of the child in all areas up to the age of 6-8 years, including the teaching of basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills. The field exposure through the project work component has provided a context for the application of theoretical concepts in real life situations during the course of the programme.

The innovation in the curriculum and the syllabus is the following : the intervention strategies of Individualised Family Support Plan, Individualised Education Plan and Group Teaching, which are the field-based hands-on component, are typically taught as academic content to students of Diploma Programmes in face-to-face mode. In fact, Individualised Family Support Plan as the appropriate form of intervention in the earliest years of the child's life is essentially ignored as a teaching content in academic programmes though it is practiced by leading organisations in their hands-on intervention work with infants and young children. However, the academics and experts associated with the Expert Committee of the Certificate Programme agreed that these concepts needed to be demystified and brought within the grasp of the learners of this Certificate Programme.

Thus, through this programme, we have developed the syllabus structure and laid out the academic norms and curriculum for future such programmes in the country.

iv) Demystification of Academic Concepts in the Self Learning Material

Having obtained the recognition from RCI, it was important to transact appropriate and adequate academic content and yet do so in a manner which would be comprehensible to a learner with 10th class qualifications. This has been achieved in the self-learning material (SLM) using various strategies as described further :

a) Difficult but critically important academic concepts in the field of special education, such as Task Analysis, Individualised Family Support Plan, Individualised Education Plan, Teaching Strategies and Group Teaching have been transacted and explained the level of 10th class pass learners. When the material was in the process of being developed, there was skepticism from senior academics about the possibility of transacting such difficult academic concepts with parents/learner at 10th pass level. However, the team at IGNOU maintained its vision and went ahead with the development of self-learning material on these lines. Subsequently, favourable feedback was received from the parents (who were our prospective learners) regarding the appropriateness of having included concepts like task analysis and teaching strategies in the material. A parent reported, "*The idea of task analysis or the methods of teaching a special child was unknown to me, but after attaining the knowledge about these form this course and applying them on my child, I have really got positive results!*"

b) Real-life situations involving children with disabilities and their families have been included as examples and short case profiles in the SLM extensively. These have been provided by the course writers and the team members on the basis of their work experience in the field. These have been printed in the SLM in italics so that they stand out from the text. The purpose of including these situations and case profiles is to illustrate/clarify the various theoretical concepts and to connect theory with everyday life. They have also been included with the intent of bonding/ making a connect with the learners and to cut away their sense of isolation by helping them see that they are not the only ones facing the difficulties that they are. The inclusion of these brief profiles seems to have served their purpose. In the words of a parent, "*The case studies have helped me to compare the problem of my child and now I can understand her better and act in a more informed way.*"

Another parent commented on how the reading of the printed material helped her to understand that the management of her child did not need a medical approach but instead required early intervention and rehabilitation.

c) Artwork and pictures have been extensively used in the text to indicate exact positioning needs and posture, and adaptations for a child with cerebral palsy. The appropriate handling and posturing of the child with cerebral palsy is the most critical feature of the child's management. In the entire Certificate Programme there are 758 artwork and photographs. A sample of the type of artwork and photographs included in the SLM is provided in Figure 1 below. Figures 2-5 depict the sample photographs used in the SLM.

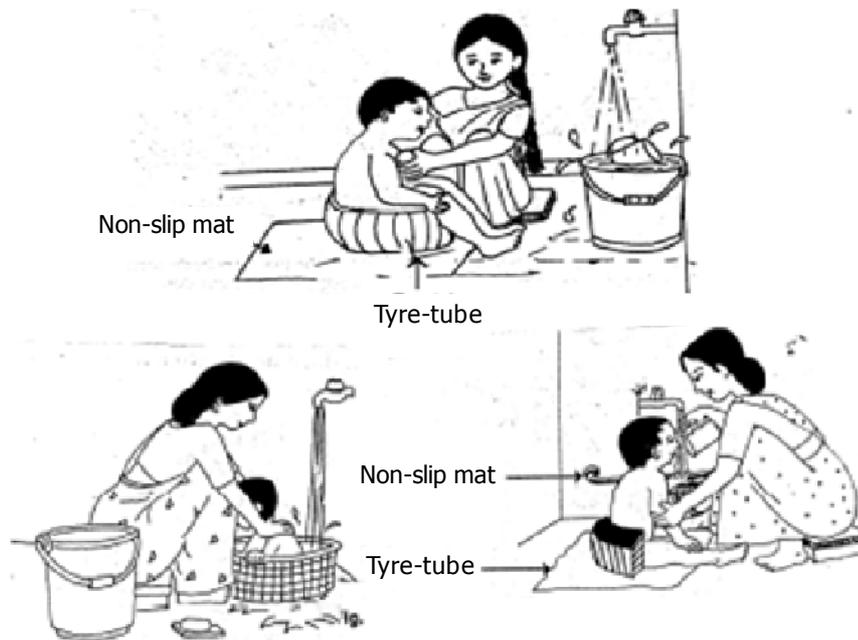


Figure 1. Sample artwork provided in the Self Learning Material.



Figure 2. With support, a child with cerebral palsy enjoys exploring the outdoors.



Figure 3. When family members spend time with the child, it helps the child to feel loved and fosters his all-round development.



Figure 4 : A child using a specially designed corner seat to travel in a bus.



Figure 5. Children with cerebral palsy participating in a board game drawn on the floor.

v) Creation of Project Manuals

In order to enable the learner to implement the intervention strategies of Individualised Family Support Plan, Individualised Education Plan and Group Teaching in the field, which comprise the application part of the programme, extensive and detailed project manuals have been developed for each of these. The creation of these three project manuals is an innovation as these are unique study material of their kind in the country. Such extensive step-by-step detailing of these intervention strategies is almost non-existent in face-to-face teaching institutions or distance education institutions as articulated by the course writers themselves who were involved in the preparation of the manuals. Development testing of the manuals was done when they were in the process of being developed in order to assess the suitability of the material being developed. The feedback from reports of the developmental testing was incorporated in the material being developed. The layout and the formatting of the project manual are innovative.

Each Project Manual has two parts – Part A and Part B. Part A describes the entire procedure of implementing Individualised Family Support Plan, Individualised Education Plan, and Group Teaching in the form of steps which are called Practical Activities 1, 2, 3.... and so on till 10. Each practical activity has been explained in detail, including the amount of time

the learners should spend on them, the pre-preparation needed etc. (Query - should I give a format of the practical activity?)

Subsequently, for each of the projects – Individualised Family Support Plan, Individualised Education Plan and Group Teaching – a case study has been developed corresponding to each of the practical activities in the project. This is the Part B of each manual. Through this case study, we have shown how a learner carried out the various practical activities of the project and how she/he reported the work done for each one of them. This case study, based on real life, serves as an example to the learners, helps them to contextualise the practical activity and gives a guideline how to do it.

It is expected that the Project Manual, apart from being useful for the students of the Certificate Programme, will set standards in face-to-face teaching in various institutions as expressed by the Programme coordinators from the Programme Study Centres during the phase of developmental testing.

c. Usefulness

The Certificate Programme enables the development of the capabilities of a marginalised section of the society - parents and family members and persons with disabilities themselves. Their enhanced capabilities help them to enter into the professional world and also are of help to them in their day-to-day interaction with children in their families. Reaching out to the disadvantaged is one of the biggest impacts of this programme justifying its development.

d. Reach

The Certificate programme has been offered in selected Regional Centres wherever RCI recognised organisations working in the field of cerebral palsy could be identified. The programme is offered through 40 learner support centres, which report to and are managed by the IGNOU Regional Centres. Till date, 580 learners have enrolled for the Certificate Programme.

e. Cost effectiveness

The funds for the development of the programme are in the process of being reimbursed by the RCI. The cost of delivery of the Programme through the learner support centres is met through fees-sharing. IGNOU recovers the cost of printing the study material. The programme of study is meant for disadvantaged groups and is not a revenue-generating programme.

f. Scalability

Since the Certificate Programme in the disability area 'Cerebral Palsy' was launched in July 2009 by IGNOU, another three similar programmes were developed in three more disability areas – Intellectual Disability (2010), Visual Impairment and Hearing Impairment (2012). The SLM prepared for Certificate Programme in the disability area 'Cerebral Palsy' – both as Theory Blocks and as the 3 Project Manuals – served as a prototype for the SLM developed for the other three Certificate Programmes in disability. These three programmes of study also have the recognition from the RCI.

g. Sustainability

The programme is sustainable especially since it is approved by the RCI. Regular renewal of the MoU with RCI will ensure that institutions working in the sector of disability continue to be identified as IGNOU learner support centres for the Certificate Programme.

h. Implementation and impact

The innovation – that is, the programme of study – is implemented through the learner support centres of IGNOU which are institutions working in the sector of disability and are recognised by the RCI as competent institutions this ensures that quality is maintained in the delivery of the programme. The learner support centres are responsible for the conduct of counselling classes, arranging for the conduct of all three Project Work, providing supervision during Project Work and arranging for the conduct of term-end project work evaluation.

The SLM, especially the Project Manuals have been appreciated for their clarity by some Coordinators and counsellors of Programme Study Centres. The feedback received from parents who pursued the Awareness-cum-Training Package in Disability showed that they have been immensely benefited by the detailed description of teaching strategies and methods described in the package. As stated earlier, this package, after modifications, forms the Course 2 of the Certificate Programme. Thus, our SLM can serve as a prototype for the development of future SLM in ODL.

Future Application

The future of this innovative programme lies in re-initiating the lapsed MoU with the RCI and identifying more learner support centres to enhance the outreach of the programme. At the same time efforts need to be made to devise the next level of the programme so that upward mobility of the learners can be sustained.

About the Innovator

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