



PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PANCHATANTRA IN MODERN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR CWSN

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Abstract

Composed by Pandit Vishnu Sharma around 300 BCE, the Panchatantra is one of the earliest documented interventions in human history for neurodivergent and non-traditional learners. Written specifically to teach three princes described as amukhashakti (incapable of learning through conventional means), the text employs animal fables, anthropomorphism, and structured narratives to circumvent cognitive barriers. This research paper examines how the narrative techniques of the Panchatantra structurally align with current principles of Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND), such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiated Instruction, Multisensory Storytelling, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Building on scholarly analyses from special education and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), this study reflects how ancient narrative pedagogy offers a sustainable framework for inclusive education in the present day and how it can be applied in modern education.

Keywords: Panchatantra, Special Education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Narrative Pedagogy, Neurodiversity, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Children with Special Needs (CWSN).

Introduction: In modern era, special education mandates that all individuals, regardless of cognitive, sensory, or developmental differences, are entitled to actionable, accessible education to meet the unique learning needs. Although formal SEND frameworks emerged in the 20th century through legislative developments like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by United States and subsequently Persons with Disabilities Act (1995)/Right to Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) & Right to free & compulsory Education for all Act (2009) with reference to India, the underlying pedagogical principles have ancient roots.

Panchatantra stories serves as an early case study in special educational intervention:

- **Frame Narrative:** King Amarasakti sought a non-traditional method to educate his three sons, who failed under formal, rote-learning scholastic methods (*Sastras*).

- **Intervention:** Scholar Vishnu Sharma understanding the limitations of the princes promised to impart functional intelligence (*Niti*) within six months using customized, narrative-based methods.

Framework developed by Pt. Sharma was divided into five books (*Mitra-bheda*, *Mitra-lapha*, *Kakorolukiyam*, *Labdhapranasam*, and *Apariksitakarakam*)—functions not merely as a literary work, but as an adaptive pedagogical system.

Alignment with Universal Design for Learning (UDL): The **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** framework, created by CAST (the Center for Applied Special Technology) in the 1990s, is an educational approach designed to optimize teaching by addressing the varied ways individuals learn. Rather than a single "one-size-fits-all" solution, UDL encourages creating flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that accommodate learner variability.

The framework is closely tied to cognitive neuroscience and is built upon three primary pillars, each addressing a distinct brain network:

1. Multiple Means of Engagement (The "Why" of Learning): This pillar focuses on the **Affective Network** of the brain, which shapes motivation, emotional involvement, and interest. Learners differ markedly in what draws their attention and motivates them to learn—some prefer working in teams, while others thrive independently; some need lot of novelty, while others prefer routine.

- **Provide options for recruiting interest:** Reduce threats and distractions, offer choices in how tasks are completed, and make learning personally relevant.
- **Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence:** Adjust demands and resources, foster collaboration and communication, and increase mastery focused feedback.
- **Provide options for self-regulation:** Assist students in setting personal goals, develop coping skills, and cultivate self-assessment and reflection.

2. Multiple Means of Representation (The "What" of Learning): This pillar focuses on the **Recognition Network**, which processes information, sensory inputs, and concepts. Because learners perceive and comprehend information differently—such as visual impairments, dyslexia, or language barriers offering content in multiple formats is important.

- **Provide options for perception:** Provide flexible ways to display information (e.g., adjustable text size, closed captions, tactile materials, or audio alternatives).

- **Provide options for language and symbols:** Clarify vocabulary and symbols, explain syntax and structure, and support decoding of text or mathematical notation.
- **Provide options for comprehension:** Anchor new information in background knowledge, highlight patterns and big ideas, and guide information processing and visualization.

3. Multiple Means of Action and Expression (The "How" of Learning): This pillar targets the **Strategic Network**, which governs planning, executing, and monitoring mental and physical actions. Learners vary in how they navigate learning environments and express what they know (e.g., individuals with dysgraphia or motor skill differences struggle with paper-and-pencil tests).

- **Provide options for physical action:** Incorporate assistive technologies, accessible navigation, and alternate response methods (e.g., voice-to-text, physical movement).
- **Provide options for expression and communication:** Allow the students to demonstrate knowledge through diverse media (e.g., video, speech, drawing, written code, or physical models).
- **Provide options for executive functions:** Help students with goal-setting, strategic planning, information management, and track their progress. .

Practical Classroom Impact:

UDL Pillar	Traditional Instruction (Fixed)	UDL Alternative (Flexible)
Engagement	Silent, independent textbook reading for all students.	Choice between individual reading, audio listening, or small-group discussion.
Representation	Lecturing using a traditional blackboard.	Pairing spoken instruction with visual diagrams, closed captions, and hands-on models.
Action & Expression	Assessing history knowledge exclusively via written essay.	Allowing assessment via written report, podcast recording, slide deck, or oral presentation.

Core Principles of Special Education Exemplified in the *Panchatantra*:

Principle of Special Education	Implementation in the Panchatantra	Behavioral & Cognitive Mechanism
Differentiated Instruction	Adaptable story length, tone, and character roles tailored to learner capacity.	Bypasses working memory deficits by adjusting information load.
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Fables focused on friendship (<i>Mitra-lapha</i>) and conflict resolution (<i>Mitra-bheda</i>).	Enhances Theory of Mind (ToM) and empathy recognition.
Executive Function Training	Decision-making consequences explicitly modeled in narrative arcs.	Strengthens impulse control, planning, and goal-directed behavior.
Multisensory Storytelling (MSST)	Use of rhythmic prose, interactive dialogue, vocal modulation, and visual imagery.	Stimulates multiple neural pathways, benefiting auditory and visual processing disorders.

Analytical Case Studies: Fables as Behavioral Interventions:**Case Study 1: *The Monkey and the Crocodile* (Cognitive Flexibility & Threat Assessment)**

- **Narrative Focus:** A crocodile tries to deceive a monkey to harvest his heart; the monkey uses quick thinking to claim his heart was left on a tree, ensuring his escape.
- **Special Education Application:** Used in interventions for learners with ASD and Intellectual Disabilities to teach **Theory of Mind (ToM)**—the understanding that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions distinct from one's own.
- **Target Outcome:** Development of prospective thinking, deception detection, and emotional regulation during high-stress scenarios.

Case Study 2: *The Four Friends and the Hunter* (Interdependence & Adaptive Skills)

- **Narrative Focus:** A mouse, a crow, a deer, and a turtle coordinate their distinct abilities to save each other from a hunter.
- **Special Education Application:** Illustrates the **Strength-Based Model** in special education. Each character exhibits specific limitations (e.g., the turtle's slowness, the mouse's physical vulnerability) that are mitigated by leveraging their unique neurodevelopmental/physical strengths.

- **Target Outcome:** Promotes peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) and self-advocacy among special needs cohorts.

Pedagogical Implications for the Modern Inclusive Classroom: Integrating *Panchatantra*-derived narrative pedagogy into modern Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) yields actionable strategies:

1. **Social Stories & Behavioral Modelling:** Reconfiguring fables into customized "Social Stories" to model appropriate classroom interactions, emotional control, and transition management for autistic learners.
2. **Bibliotherapy for Emotional Resilience:** Using narrative outcomes to help children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) process fear, anger, rejection, and peer pressure within a safe, vicarious boundary.
3. **Cognitive Scaffolding in Speech & Language Therapy:** Leveraging the repetitive, rhythmic structure of classic fables to enhance mean length of utterance (MLU), phonological awareness, and narrative retell skills in children with Speech and Language Impairments (SLI).

Conclusion: The *Panchatantra* serves as a historical precursor to contemporary special education frameworks. By shifting the educational emphasis from rigid instructional formats to flexible, narrative-driven pedagogy, Vishnu Sharma showed that ***learning difficulties arise not from a child's inability to learn, but from an environment's failure to adapt its teaching methods***. Integrating these ancient narrative structures alongside modern assistive technology and pedagogical standards offers a holistic, culturally grounded, and cognitively accessible path forward for special education.

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