



Inclusive education in India: how and why?

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Received on: 16-05-2015 Accepted on: 03-07-2015

ABSTRACT

For decades special schools have been the centre of learning for the children with special needs. A number of countries in the Western world, educators and administrators have put a great deal of effort into the development of a thorough and widely accepted system of special schools. In these schools all the available expertise has been concentrated in an attempt to educate pupils with special needs in the best possible way. However, this view of special education has gradually changed. Knowledge, expertise and facilities are still of importance to the education of pupils with special needs, but the segregation of these pupils is now perceived as unacceptable. The prevailing view is that, they should be educated together with their peers in regular education settings. The consequence is that regular and special education as separate systems disappear and are replaced by a single system that includes a wide range of pupils. In such way an 'inclusive' system for all pupils including the children with special needs where all study together. Though India has witnessed phenomenal expansion of the educational opportunities at the threshold of 21st century, the differently abled children have not benefited substantially for their growth and achievement. The education of such children in India is more than hundred years old, but our services are far from expected. The present paper aims to highlight the existing educational setting for the differently abled children in India. It also focuses on how inclusive education can be made more effective in Indian context.

Keywords: disability, differently abled children, inclusive education, special schools, educational setting

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has been defined at various ways¹ that addresses the learning needs of the differently abled children. There is confusion about the definition of inclusive education and it seems to be difficult to differentiate inclusive education from the integrated education. Thus, before discussing the importance of inclusive education it is necessary to define the term properly. Pijle and his colleague define 'inclusive education' as an educational system that includes a large diversity of pupils and which differentiates education for this diversity. According to them the term 'inclusion' has a wider context than the term 'integration'. Integration reflects the attempts to place pupils with special needs in the mainstream in regular education. Such children have to learn in a pre-set

educational setting. Integration should not be about where pupils are placed and not about providing access to pre-set norms of learning and behavior; it is about fitting schools to meet the needs of all their pupils. This wider notion of integration is very close to the meaning of inclusive education.² The emphasis of integration is on providing supports to individual students to enable them to 'fit in' to the mainstream programme without any changes being made to that programme. In contrast to integration, inclusion is about the pupil's right to participate fully in school life and the school's duty to welcome and accept them.³ The purpose of inclusive education is not confined to bring the children with special needs within the same roof, but to provide them respect and confidence to participate and contribute in the learning process equally with their peers.

Booth (1996)⁴ described inclusive education as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. Similarly, UNESCO (2003)⁵ defined inclusion as a developmental approach that '...seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion'. Many international declarations have legitimated the idea of

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Cite as: A. Arora, P. K. Sahu. Inclusive education in India: how and why? *J. Disability Stud.*, 2015, 1(1), 31-34.

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inclusion. The principles of inclusive education for example were adopted at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994)⁶ and were restated at the Dakar World Education Forum (2000).⁷ It reads: Inclusive education means that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.⁵

Inclusive education is not merely about providing access into mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. It is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system. Existing school systems in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, leadership roles; will have to change. This is because inclusive education is about the participation of ALL children and young people and the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice.⁸ Inclusive Education is a Process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. It involves restructuring the culture, policies and practices in schools so that they can respond to the diversity of students in their locality. Schools should be improved in all dimensions to address the educational needs of all children.⁹

SPECIAL EDUCATION TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Since time immortal, education in India has been the top most priority. Ancient education systems such as *Gurukuls* or *Rishikuls* were opened for all including the disabled children. Historically, voluntary agencies have predominated the field in providing educational service to people with disabilities in India.¹⁰⁻¹¹ Starting with Christian missionaries in the 1880s, the charity model became part of the special schools they established,¹¹ for instance, for the blind in 1887, for 'the Deaf and Mute' in 1888, for Crippled Children' in the 1850s, and for the 'mentally deficient' in 1934.¹⁰ After independence, the Ministry of Education, Government of India focused primarily on setting up national research institutes, awarding scholarships and granting monetary assistance to voluntary agencies to establish special schools.¹⁰⁻¹¹ This system used to be seen as an expression for the care for pupils with special needs. Unfortunately, the special children from the poor families and rural area were far from getting such facilities as most of the centres are located in cities and the voluntary agencies charged user fees for service.

After the apathetic attitude of Government for few decades since independence, the Government of India in 1974 responded with a pilot project, the Integrated Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme, which was expanded as a nationwide project in 1987. The rationale behind the project was to bring the disabled children into mainstream education. Despite the

efforts made by government, a very marginal number of disabled children integrated into regular education. Dissatisfaction with the progress towards integration, consideration of cost involved, and the advantages of inclusive environment in bringing about increased acceptance of learners with Special Educational Needs, led to demand for more radical change. During that time in 1994, inclusion captured the field after the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca. In India, there was confusion in differentiating the concept of inclusion and integration. The most significant contribution of the Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005 helped to clarify both the concepts. It states that: 'whereas under the Scheme of Integrated Education for the Disabled Children (IEDC) as it stands at present, children with disabilities are placed in a regular school without making any changes in the school to accommodate and support diverse needs, the revised IECYD will, in contrast, modify the existing physical infrastructures and teaching methodologies to meet the needs of all children, including Children with Special Needs.¹²

Another Scheme – Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) has been launched from the year 2009-10 which replaces the earlier scheme of IEDC and provides assistance for the inclusive education of the disabled children in classes IX-XII. This scheme now subsumed under Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) from 2013.¹³ The scheme covers all children studying at the secondary stage in Government, local body and Government-aided schools, with one or more disabilities as defined under the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) and the National Trust Act (1999) in the class IX to XII, namely blindness, low vision, leprosy cured, hearing impairment, locomotory disabilities, mental retardation, mental illness, autism, and cerebral palsy and may eventually cover speech impairment, learning disabilities, etc.¹³ Girls with the disabilities receive special focus to help them gain access to secondary schools, as also to information and guidance for developing their potential. Under this scheme disabled children will get support, such as medical and educational assessment, books and stationery, uniforms, transport allowance, reader allowance, stipend for girls, support services, assistive devices, boarding the lodging facility, therapeutic services, teaching learning materials, etc. Other provisions are appointment of special education teachers, allowances for general teachers for teaching such children, teacher training, orientation of school administrators, establishment of resource room, providing barrier free environment, etc.

Children with disabilities are a minority that are not prioritized in the context of education programmes in India, although they are often found in many marginalized groups that are catered for non-disabled, for example, girls, scheduled tribe, scheduled caste, and other backward caste children. Inclusive education may be a way of merging these children's needs in order to improve school quality and achieve EFA [Education for All]. However, a special needs conceptualization of Inclusive Education is dominant in India, combined with negative

attitudes towards disability, is currently preventing this approach.¹⁴

RELEVANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

DFID (2000)¹⁵ highlights how disability can aggravate poverty because it can lead to isolation and economic strain for the whole family. Disabled children are more likely to die young, or be neglected, malnourished and poor, while the denial of education can lead to a lack of employment opportunities and so poverty. People with disabilities cannot organise or mobilise until their practical needs, such as mobility aids, are met, and they cannot fight for their rights until they are more educated.

Though India has witnessed phenomenal expansion of the educational opportunities in last few decades, our disabled children have not benefited substantially from this growth with the main stream students. According to the 58th National Sample Survey 2002¹⁶, the total number of people with disabilities in the country is 18.49 million, constituting about 1.8% of the total population. In terms of educational levels, only 11% of the children with disabilities between the ages of 5-18 years in urban areas and less than 1% in rural areas were enrolled in special schools. It means the children with disabilities are the most marginalized and excluded categories to receive education. On the other hand inclusion as a strategy meant to include the excluded or marginalized groups in educational programmes including schooling.¹⁷ Education cannot be for all until it is received by all. A system that excludes some people, cannot be for all and should therefore give way to one that is accommodating of all. Inclusion promotes a sense of cooperation and the feeling of togetherness in the learner. Inclusive education services allow children with disabilities to stay with their family and to go to the nearest school, just like all other children. This circumstance is of vital importance to their personal development. It promotes favourable competition among school children of different abilities, endowments and backgrounds. Inclusive education provides a means of building a cooperative school community, where all are accommodated and able to participate. Inclusive schooling is cost effective, as all the learners are accommodated in the same environment using virtually the same facilities.¹⁸ Unnecessary duplications of cost that are associated with segregated arrangements are avoided in inclusion. Thus, concept of inclusive education, at present, has now widely accepted all over the world.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: HOW

Inclusive Education is accepted as an integral part of general education. Training regular classroom teacher in the area of integrated education, curriculum modification, parental education, awareness to parents and developing positive attitude towards the disability are the key point of successful inclusive education. To open up the regular school system to disabled children is not an easy task. The policy on inclusion and mainstreaming can easily get failure if not implemented carefully. There is an urgent need for interventions for equipping general teachers with special skills, making general

curricula, teaching methods. Evaluation procedures, learning material disability-sensitive and addressing the attitudes /needs of other children in the school to ensure such interventions benefit to all children.¹⁹ As a system, inclusive education should be flexible. This need for flexibility must be reflected in the methods and materials used to give these children the widest possible access to the regular curriculum. When discussing the kind of service needed, the starting point should always be what is best for the particular child. Emphasising inclusive education does not rule out special schools or centres. They would still be required to cater to children with profound and complex difficulties in need of more specialised and extensive help, including e.g. many deaf children. This alternative should, however, not be considered, unless classroom placement cannot meet their needs.

In this context, it is important to stress the role parents have. They have a right to be involved in all decision-making concerning their child. They should be seen as partners in the education process. Where there is such co-operation, parents have been found to be very important resources for the teachers and the schools. Children with disabilities need child-centred curriculum, which takes into account the individual needs of children.²⁰ The curriculum needs to set specific, observable, measurable and achievable learning outcomes. A flexible, locally relevant curriculum, teaching and learning strategies are intrinsically important for children with special needs to participate in the educational process. They require a learning environment in which they can actively participate in learning in small groups learning settings.

Accessibility is an important domain that cannot be overlooked at any cost. The term accessibility typically conjures up images of buildings and discussion about universal design. Building accessibility is absolutely imperative for students with disabilities to be included as an equal number in their school. But what is typically more challenging for mainstream schools who are trying to become inclusive is converting their curriculum to fit students of all ability levels. It is important to remember that having an assessable curriculum does not only benefit students with disabilities, but also all other children in the classroom, because it is taught with the intention of reaching all students equally.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TEACHERS

The way in which teachers realize inclusion in the classroom largely depends on their attitude towards pupils with special needs and on the resources available to them. Teaching pupils with special needs in the regular classroom is no doubt deviates from the 'regular programme'.²¹ Teachers are confronted with the question of how to instruct these pupils. Special needs pupils may require more instruction time or other learning methods and professional knowledge. To realize the inclusion of these pupils in regular education, teachers must try to enhance the amount of resources and differentiate between pupils with respect to the amount and type of resources available to them. The idea is that a successful inclusion of

special needs pupils not only depends on appropriate organization, legislation and regulations, but also on the availability of resources in the regular classroom and on the way teachers differentiates the resources between pupils. Teacher's attitudes, available instructions time, the knowledge and skills of teachers and the teaching methods and materials on hand seem to be important prerequisites for special needs teaching in regular setting.

Training teachers in teaching methods that include students of all ability levels, as well as spreading awareness to teachers about the importance and benefits of inclusion, is one of the most important parts of implementing a system of inclusive education, because teachers are the people on ground who are going to accommodate the students. There is inadequate policy dissemination around inclusion that many teachers know little about policies regarding inclusion and students with disabilities. The World Bank claims that the attitudes of general educators or educators in a mainstream environment, towards students with disabilities are generally improving, probably as a result of the various Government policies and schemes.²² The rehabilitation Council of India runs short term and long term courses for various categories of professionals run by different Universities/Institutions. The efforts need to be further supported. Teaching educators about the importance of inclusion and how to run an inclusive classroom is imperative for reaching the goal of education for all. There is no need of reinforcing the fact that teacher education remains very weak link with respect to equipping teachers to be prepared for an inclusive classroom environment. The teacher education diplomas and degrees offer Inclusive Education as a subject in order to prepare teachers to identify and diagnose disability. But the need of the hour is to give them a holistic perspective with respect to dealing with diversity and challenge with a positive attitude.

CONCLUSION

Right to Education Act 2009 ensures education to all children irrespective of their caste, religion, ability, and so on. The Government of India is trying to improve its education system focussing on the inclusive approach. Disabled children have equal right to get education as per their needs and capability. Every stakeholder of the society has to understand their role and responsibilities to work with cooperation and coherence to ensure that not a single child is left without school education. Differently abled children should be treated equally as the normal children and instead of looking them in sympathy their talents and abilities should be recognised for their self-respect and welfare of the society.

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