India Moving Towards Inclusive Education

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According to the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) every child between the ages of 6 to 14 years has the right to free and compulsory education. There are an estimated 25 million children out of school in India (MHRD 2003 statistics, cited in World Bank, 2004), many of whom are marginalized by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. While many educational programmes have attempted to reach out to these previously excluded children, those with disabilities are often forgotten, emphasising their invisible status in a rigidly categorized society. To accommodate these children our classrooms have to be inclusive in nature. The term inclusion has to be demystified and translated into practical answers for making inclusive classrooms a reality. The present paper highlights the perceptions, perspectives and commitments in fostering inclusion. This paper, while limited by the lack of available empirical data and constraints of desk research, aims to present a conceptual framework to study the educational perspective, social perspective and legal perspective of inclusion. It also helps in the reconceptualization of inclusive education as an education quality issue to benefit all children. This could contribute in the long-term towards the achievement of Education For All and fulfilment of the Fundamental Right to Education enshrined in the Constitution of India in 2002.

Introduction

For parents the birth of their child is the most beautiful moment of their life. The child is groomed, nurtured and given opportunities to evolve into his full potential. The whole family and friends are there to support and encourage this growing child at different milestones of life. As an adult, the same child grows into an important member of the family who is contributing significantly to the family dynamics. When a child is born with a disability, there is disappointment, frustration and anger. Parents are in a state of shock and denial and spend a rather long time in coming to terms with the reality. The child is (in most instances) provided for but not encouraged to grow by doing things like another normal child. The child is denied entry

into a normal school, is either kept at home or in some cases sent to a special school, which could be residential in nature. When s/he reaches young adulthood, he may be put through a vocational training programme that is usually obsolete in terms of employment. When s/he faces the open world, he realizes how "handicapped" s/he is in many situations. The attitude of the society, lack of acceptance, lack of job opportunity, lack of dignity makes it a struggle for her/him in the normal world. Exclusion, which begins almost from birth, transforms the disability into a social handicap and social burden. The family, immediate relatives and the society force this exclusion upon the disabled person. It is this exclusion that denies the person with disability the dynamics of family and community life.

Concept of Inclusion

Inclusion is the philosophy, which believes in including a child with disability or any marginalized child into the main stream of life. Right from day one the child learns the art of living at a friendly pace, recognizing and appreciating expectations, responsibilities, challenges and the opportunities of life.

There are primarily three aspects to understand inclusion:

1. Educational Perspective;
2. Social Perspective;
3. Legal Perspective.

Educational perspective:

Inclusive education is a human right, all children with disability and without disability should be learning together in regular schools. Limitations and special needs of the children should be recognized and catered for, with a focus on ability. As was expressed in Salamanca Conference (1994), the full inclusion of all children in ordinary schools can come about only as a result of reform of the school and the education system as a whole. Inclusive education does not simply mean to move children from special education services to an ordinary classroom. What it calls for is changes in curriculum, teacher training, developing support services to schools and classroom teachers, physical settings designed to encourage independence and seeing that there is acceptance and a sense of belonging for the children with disabilities.

In India, Ministry of Human Resource Development in its draft document on Inclusive Education (2003) has defined Inclusive Education as *"a system, which aims to provide a favourable setting for achieving equal opportunities and full participation for all children with disabilities within general educational system"*. Inclusive education is one of our contemporary national concerns in education. In India, inclusive education is a system, which aims to provide favourable setting for achieving equal opportunities and full participation for all children with disabilities within general education system. It is important to arrange for the participation of children with disabilities in already existing programmes available for all children, remove the physical barriers which come in the way of accessing facilities in the school, be flexible in the methods and materials used, and to give these children widest possible access to regular

curriculum. Examination system needs to be revamped to accommodate the special needs of these children. The focus is on assessing the student's ability to do a task, and the medium should not be a barrier. It is appropriate to adjust the medium of expression. Special considerations can be planned for children with special needs. All syllabi can be examined initially to identify potential barriers to students completing the mandatory requirements. Additional learning experiences can be provided to the students with disabilities to have the same opportunity to gain the same knowledge and skills as their peers. This should be ensured with adaptations in the setting, mode of communication, mode of delivery, time allocation, interactive opportunities and specially designed assessment tasks and assessment procedures. Education in inclusive set up would provide greater acceptance of diversity for children who learn together. Education would in turn provide the special child not only learning and vocational skills, but also nurture an intellect and a psychology that reflects and demonstrates confidence, a positive attitude, a combination of skills and a belief in one's own self to be ready to swim the deep and dark waters of a tough and demanding world.

If only certain modifications and adaptations are made as many as 80 to 90 percent children with special education needs could get their education in mainstream schools. So instead of getting carried away by the remaining 10 to 20 percent of children with severe special needs and blocking our mind to even consider inclusive school set up we need to focus on the 80 to 90 percent of children whose needs can be and must be met within the inclusive classrooms.

Social perspective:

India is blessed with a rich heritage of diversity. This diversity spans across culture, religion, language, social structure, ability and so on. Classroom must reflect the diversity, as it exists in our country. Children must grow up recognizing, experiencing, respecting and accommodating diversity. Disability is a part of our social set up and our various perceptions about persons with disabilities should not be that of segregation or seclusion but that of inclusion. People cannot be isolated from one another, as mankind is interconnected. Every person must be a part of the same society. The community should help the development of resources where all children are equally valued and have the same opportunities for participation.

Inclusion stems from a belief system. The word inclusion implies being embraced into the whole. Segregation of these students conveys a strong message that they do not 'fit' or belong. *Aren't we by doing that, taking away their human right?* Inclusive education is a human right issue. Inclusion is a political strategy based on human rights and democratic principles that confronts all forms of discrimination, as a part of concern to develop an inclusive society. Inclusion enables all people to participate together in society from the beginning, contributing to social harmony, and stimulating the building of relationships among individuals, groups and nations. Inclusion provides an opportunity for planners, designers, policy makers, administrators and implementers to work on and develop the concept of a universal design. This would be making of a civil society that provides for all its members without exception.

The most important barrier to inclusion is the 'attitude' of the non-disabled world, so to say, towards the people with disabilities. The negative attitude is because of lack of awareness about the disabilities and the persons with disabilities. Inclusion is not restricted to the school

boundaries, though it should be there of course, but it must extend beyond to touch on the formation of self, and the ideologies and values of the wider societal culture. The link between educational inclusion and the wider motion of social justice is both a microcosm and a path way towards an inclusive society. The belief in inclusion as a means to build a more cohesive society, has been reiterated internationally by Salamanca Statement in 1994. If we have to work towards the transformation of the present day world community, education must strive to open its doors to all the students, recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, value their diversity. Regular schools with inclusive orientations are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Social climate has to conceptualize 'sameness' and 'differences' to understand 'equality in difference', to treat people equally but not necessary the same way. What is required is to give them opportunities to be equal and the right to be different.

Legal perspective:

Many important conventions, declarations and action plans have been accepted by government, which is related to education for all changes in legislation help in ensuring this objective. The actualization of the rights of people and children with disabilities depends on the political will, which would have its effect on the community.

United Nations General Assembly in 1975 adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled persons and thereafter many significant milestones have been achieved. The convention on the "Rights of the child" 1989, has been ratified by all countries in the Asia Pacific region. This along with UNESCAP Report in 1999 on 'Education for Children and Youth with Disabilities into the 21st Century' point out that while some progress has been made, much more remains to be done for a majority of children with disabilities.

The World Declaration on Education for ALL and its Framework for Action States that the learning needs of children with disabilities should be met within the regular education system. Some other significant Conventions and Declarations like the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Person (1993-2002), focused on the major areas of concern of manpower development etc. The World Conference on Special Needs Education and the Salamanca Statement, 1994, brought together government representative, world experts in special needs education and international NGOs to focus on inclusive education.

India also has taken several initiatives in the same direction. National Policy of Education (NPE, 86-92), Project on Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED, 1987), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP 1994), propose the provision of improved educational services, medical care, vocational – training, employment and social security for all persons with disabilities. There are some special legislations related to the disabled persons and their rights in India which have been enacted by the Union Government; the Mental Health Act (1987), Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), Persons with disability act (1995), the National Trust for welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act (1999). All these laws are based on Article 14 of the constitution of India, which focuses on equality of all Indians and protection of their rights. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2002) launched by the government is an effort to universalize elementary education by

community-ownership of the school system. In 2007, India ratified the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The Convention was seen as a significant step in the paradigm shift in India from charity and welfare to rights and empowerment of people with disabilities. According to Right to Education Act (2009) schools will ensure that children from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups shall not be segregated from the other children in the classrooms. Provision of early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, is one of the six Education For All (EFA) goals.

Although there is no numerical target for reaching the target group within a fixed time-frame, governments have been urged to expand access, improve quality and ensure equity in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services meant for children in 3 to 6 years. The National Policy on Education 1986 (GOI, 1986) and its Plan of Action (GOI, 1992), have placed immense importance on pre-school education. However, it has not been considered a fundamental right, nor it is being fully managed by the educational departments at national or state level although it is partially supported by SSA, which includes a major component of ECCE. In India, preschool education is provided by private schools and government ICDS (Anganwadi) centres. According to the estimate given by the Seventh All India Education Survey (NCERT, 2005), there are 493,700 pre-primary institutions in India, out of which 456,994 are in rural areas. These schools serve 26.453 million children of which 12.829 million are girls according to District Information System for Education (DISE) data (2007-08). The percentage of enrolment in primary schools with pre-primary facilities is low. It was 10% in 2007-08 compared to 7.7% in 2004-05. The highest percentage of pre-primary enrolment in primary schools is in Madhya Pradesh (19.6%) and the lowest of 5.0% in Bihar (Mehta, 2010). The third round (2005-06) of National Family Health Survey data (IIPS, 2007) shows that around 56% of children in preschool are enrolled in Anganwadis (ICDS Centres) for early childhood care and education. Among them only 31% of children are attending the centres regularly. A large variation is also found in access to early childhood care and education across the states. Children belonging to marginalized groups in society, particularly girls, depend on public pre-primary schools, whereas those belonging to higher socio-economic groups are more likely to attending private schools. Since education of children between 3-6 years old is not a fundamental right, it is not legally mandated. Because of this preschool education is suffering from inadequate coverage and poor quality benefiting very few children.

While the Government is making policies for inclusion at pre-primary level, the *Scheme of Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage* (IEDSS) has also been launched from the year 2009-10. This Scheme provides assistance for the inclusive education of children with disabilities in classes IX-XII. The objective is to enable all students with disabilities, after completing eight years of elementary schooling, to pursue further four years of secondary schooling in an inclusive and enabling environment. The scheme covers all children studying at 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, loco motor disabilities, intellectual disability, mental illness, autism and cerebral palsy, speech-language impairment, learning disabilities, etc. Girls with disabilities receive special focus to help them gain access to secondary schools, as also to information and guidance for their

developing potential. Setting up of Model inclusive schools in every State is envisaged. Assistance is admissible for two major components:

1. Student-oriented components, 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.
2. Other components include 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.

The School Education Department of the State Governments/Union Territory (UT) administrations is the implementing agency. They involve NGOs having experience in the field of education of students with disabilities in the implementation of the scheme.

Role of educationists in inclusion

The educationists have a social commitment in fostering inclusion. Having said that inclusive education forms the basis for developing an inclusive society, the onus lies to a great extent on the educators. Education systems as they are designed today based on homogenous delivery rather than diversity need to be changed. Removing exclusion in and from education is part of the process of reducing exclusion in society challenging the inequalities of power and recognizing and removing the oppression faced by the excluded children can only realize this.

Staff development and teacher education is crucial so that teachers understand developmental needs and characteristics of children with disabilities. Development of child centred programmes that support active learning is the need of the hour. How to design that curriculum that furthers cognitive development via concrete experiences is what the teachers ought to be trained in. The affective aspect has to be built in the future teachers. Empathy and not sympathy, treating the children with special needs at par with their peers and to neither over estimate and nor under estimate, is what the teachers need to do.

Educationists can help the policy makers, the administrators by giving their input in the needs of children with disabilities. A partnership within the faculty of education and special education is what can bridge the gap between the two streams of education. Higher Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (HEPSEN) scheme of UGC highlights the role of educators to make sure that inclusion is not only at elementary level but also education at higher level should be inclusive in nature.

Education professionals must also make a commitment to include the education of the children with disabilities within the purview of general education under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. By its placement in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the dichotomy begins. The attitude of tolerance, pity and a hidden segregation creeps in. Advocacy for persons with disability would bring in changes at the policymaking.

Conclusion

The Dakar Frame work for Action of the World Education Forum has come to a new resolution to achieve '*Education for All*' by 2015. One has to understand the philosophy of all the provisions available, which propagate integrationist education. It is time that the law on disability in India creates an explicit and unequivocal obligation on part of the government to provide education to all students with disabilities under a totally inclusive system and this must become a part and parcel of a holistic education policy in the country.

Mere provisions of access and enrolment of children with disabilities in schools is not enough for achieving the goal of 'education for all' through 'education with all', but attitude of the general education system towards education of children with disabilities needs major changes for inclusion to happen in the real sense of the word. The system should be put under scrutiny and not the individual with special needs. There is a need of a paradigmatic shift and the changes have to be so profound so as to transform the existing school systems. Education across the levels has to be reinvented and reconstructed so as to reduce the inequalities which arise from birth or otherwise rather than exaggerate them. The future classrooms have to be inclusive in nature. The first step is to make a commitment that it works and the rest follows.

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