

Inclusion in Education for Better Future

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Abstract

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) mandates free and compulsory elementary education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is the key vehicle for implementation of RTE Act. One of the important components of SSA is Inclusive Education of Children with Special Needs (CWSN). The thrust of SSA is on providing quality inclusive education to all children with special needs. However, inclusion implies equal opportunities and full participation of All children with special needs in school activities. For this, the environment has to be disabled-friendly and barrier free (77.37 percent of schools under SSA are now barrier-free). Necessary support services are needed; over 20 thousand resource persons have been appointed and close to 800 non-governmental organizations are involved in this area. More and more children are being provided with much needed assistive devices and technologies, large print and Braille books to facilitate their inclusion in regular classrooms. Over 2.3 million children with special needs are now enrolled in schools in SSA. The critical link to making inclusion of CWSN happen in schools and classrooms is the teacher. Hence, capacities of the teachers need to be built up on those pedagogical practices that would address the needs of all children with special needs, especially those with high level support needs in a mainstream classroom. One of SSA's goals is to ensure that there are enough trained teachers to respond to and address the challenge of inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Children With Special Needs (CWSN) „Education For All (EFA), Diversities, District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).

Introduction:

Education contributes to an individual's journey toward self-reliance and independence. Hence, education systems must be designed and organised to meet the varying needs of individual learners, and provide an appropriate education and fulfil the fundamental right to education of each child. The Government of India is committed to provide Education for All (EFA), and has launched innovative legislation and policies in the past three decades to attain the goal of universalisation of elementary education. It is clear that EFA cannot be achieved unless all children, including the large population of children with special needs, are provided educational services.

Children with disabilities often experience multiple disadvantage: in part due to their impairment as well as membership in other disadvantaged social groups, such as gender, caste, tribe and socioeconomic status. Children with special needs not only need access to schooling, but more critically require responsive schools that cater to the specific learning needs of each child. Until very recently, children with special needs were perceived as 'different', and unable to be part of mainstream schools. They were often isolated from their peers and kept at home or accommodated in special schools, located in cities across India. Today, the term inclusion is increasingly used in the field of education, reflecting changing ideologies and

perceptions, and providing a basis for generating action towards developing quality schools. In this module, Inclusive Education (IE) means that all students in a school are full members of a school community and each student participates equally in the opportunities and responsibilities of the general education environment. There is growing recognition that as classrooms become more diverse, teachers have to teach in a way that ensures that all children, including those with disabilities, are learning. IE is a child-focused approach that acknowledges that all children are individuals with different learning needs and speeds. With IE, teaching and learning can become more effective, relevant and meaningful for all. While inclusion is a very attractive philosophy, and widely accepted, its implementations differs substantially from school to school and from teacher to teacher. Even though there is no such thing as a ‘one plan fits all’, there are teaching strategies that meet the unique educational, social and instructional needs of students with special needs within general education classes. These strategies are necessary so that the ideological and often value-laden concept of inclusion can be translated into effective classroom practice.

Classroom Realities and Existing Diversities

Political Context :

India has ratified the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.³ Additionally, the CRPD requires ensuring that accommodations be made and support be provided to “facilitate effective education... consistent with the goal of full inclusion”.⁴ It is now widely recognized that placement within a mainstream setting is important, but this is only a starting point for bringing about inclusive education. There are various constitutional provisions in India that have promoted mainstreaming of children with special needs into regular schools. Article 21A of the Constitution guarantees education as a fundamental right to all children in the 6-14 age group, while Section 26 of the Persons with Disabilities Act, (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act(1995) articulates that free and compulsory education has to be provided to all children with disabilities up to the minimum age of 18 years. The Government of India’s 12th Five-Year Plan considered exclusion the single most important challenge in universalizing elementary education. The Draft Persons with Disabilities Bill (2012) enshrines a strong commitment to inclusive education. Government policies and schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act(2009), have changed the education landscape significantly, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of out-of school children in the last decade. This has also led to an increasing number of children with disability entering government and private schools. SSA’s goal is to provide eight years of elementary schooling for all children, including those with special needs, in the 6-14 age group. Children with disabilities in the 15-18 age group are provided free education under two national schemes: Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhijan (RMSA). The 2001 census reports that fifty-one percent of persons with disabilities are illiterate, suggesting that India has to continue its efforts to provide Education for All (EFA). It is therefore essential that children with disabilities are effectively mainstreamed into regular schools where teachers have been trained in inclusive education.

Diversity in the Classroom :

Today classrooms are no longer homogenous and diversity is clearly emerging as the norm. Children from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, besides children with disabilities, are now in regular schools. A typical classroom of an Indian

school, will have children from diverse cultures, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and different abilities, including those with a variety of disabilities. Thus, diversity in the classroom must be recognised, accepted and addressed as a reality, in order to realise the goal of EFA. Teachers are key to realising the potential of each child in their classroom. The activity is about accepting existing 'human diversity' and individual differences as reality and 'diverse abilities' as one of the dimensions of human diversity! The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual. The pedagogic treatment should be according to the individual's needs, their personal learning styles and the environmental consequences they are facing. It gives the scope to think about new practices such as inclusion, integration, etc., as well as to face the challenges and make use of opportunities to be responsive to the individual needs of the diverse learners.

Conceptual Understanding of IE from Multiple Perspectives:

Inclusion has its perspectives both from the sociological as well as from the rights-based approach due to the changing scenario of society and the societal and national perceptions of including all. UNESCO (2008) recast inclusive education to include a social justice perspective:

"Inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all, while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination."

In India, the social justice approach to inclusion received impetus from the Education Commission Report (1964-66), which recommended placement of the disabled child, 'as far as possible', in ordinary schools. This was followed by the 1986-90 National Policy on Education and Programme of Action (POA) and two flagship initiatives: District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and SSA, both with the objective of inclusion and developing quality education for all. India ratified the CRPD, which provides legal obligations to ensuring inclusive education for all children with disabilities and later passed the historic RTE Act, which provided a justiciable legal framework, entitling all children between the ages of 6-14 to free education. RTE also lists children with disabilities (special needs) under disadvantaged groups, and details the necessary provisions and entitlements to meet their specific needs.

Development of Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education gathered momentum with various conventions and policies at international and national levels, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993). An important contribution to the development of inclusive education was UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), which called for the improvement of the general education system to enable it to include all children regardless of individual difference and difficulties.

Principles of Inclusion:

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) articulated the underlying principles on which IE is based:

- Every child has a fundamental right to education;
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs;
- Education systems need to accommodate this diversity in the student population;
- Those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs; and,
- Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

Rationale for Inclusive Education:

The landmark RTE Act has made elementary education the fundamental right of all children. The SSA Framework for Implementation (Ministry of Human Resources Development, 2011) has emphasised not only providing physical, but also quality and social access. To meet RTE's mandate of providing quality education to all children, schools need to recognise and take under consideration the diverse needs of all children and the barriers faced by some; adapt to different learning styles and provide quality education through the appropriate use of resources, entitlements, school organisation, and plans. Schools also need to build strong partnerships with the broader community. This requires schools and teachers in particular to ensure that all students, including children with special needs, have the right to be valued and actively participate within the learning environment that delivers a quality education best suited to their unique competencies, skills and attributes. Multiple approaches for learners to facilitate inclusion and an inclusive learning environment have to be developed. The global movement for the universalisation of primary education is based on the need to develop an equitable and inclusive society which values all and provides space for the development of all people in the society. It is also perceived to have a larger impact on the society to make it an inclusive one. There are three main justifications for inclusive education:

Human Rights:

As a matter of fundamental human rights, children with disabilities should not be excluded from mainstream schools and peers, and segregated on the grounds of their disability. The CRPD, Salamanca Statement and the UN CRC give clear international legal authority to the issue of inclusion as a human right.

Educational:

Education is considered a fundamental right in many countries. Those who have ratified the CRPD accept it as an obligation and are beginning to provide equitable education in mainstream schools where all children can learn together: boys, girls, children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and children with disabilities. This means developing an inclusive learning environment, which ensures learning for all.

Social Justice:

Inclusive schools enable development of attitudes and values to differences and diversity by educating all children. It is the basis for developing a tolerant and just society. Mainstreaming children with disabilities into regular schools is also a more cost effective approach. Children with disabilities are scattered across any given community, meaning that it is more viable and cost effective for them to attend a local general school, instead of establishing separate schools. This is especially important

for children living in rural and remote areas. With supportive measures in place, children with disabilities can learn in a general school.

Key Principles of Inclusive Education:

1. Inclusive Education is based on the belief that the right to education is a basic human right for all children and the foundation for just society.
2. Inclusive Education is good teaching.
3. Inclusive Education is a strategy to implement and fulfil the obligation of RTE.
4. Providing equal opportunities to all children, which does not mean similar things for all children. It is based on the concept of providing equitable learning opportunities, keeping in mind the differences and difficulties of the child besides their diverse background and their needs.
5. Teaching children from diverse backgrounds requires a tremendous amount of flexibility in teaching practices and processes as well as in curriculum design and learning materials.
6. Ensuring equitable learning opportunities by making the education system accessible and responsive to all children, including disadvantaged children, i.e. Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST), minority, children with disabilities, girls, urban deprived, and also ensuring their entitlements to achieve optimal learning outcomes.
7. Inclusive Education is a process of addressing and responding to diverse needs of learners by reducing exclusion within schools.
8. Inclusive Education is an entry point to improve the quality of the education system in terms of culture, policy and practices (pedagogy, classroom management, teaching learning materials (TLMs) and the learning environment).
9. Inclusive teachers are good teachers who are flexible in their approach and believe that the source of difficulties in learning is largely environmental and can be addressed.

“Diversity should be welcomed” (UNESCO, 2013)

When diversity is welcomed, teachers and learners are supported to value such diversity rather than fearing it. This helps develop inclusive social skills, such as empathy and cooperation, and reinforces the idea that all learners bring richness and value to schools, classrooms and teacher education institutions. An inclusive approach to education creates opportunities for teachers to tap into and develop the particular strengths and experiences their learners bring into education settings, in order to complement learning and promote social justice. There is sufficient evidence that proves that addressing needs of children with disability by adopting inclusive teaching learning strategies supports learning for all.

Barriers and Facilitators to Achieve Inclusion:

Inclusion is based on the principle that every individual is able to fully participate in and contribute to his/her community, which is the foundation for an inclusive society. An inclusive society is one that facilitates the inclusion of ALL, including the most marginalised groups. In today's society, effective inclusion is also based on the education of the individual.

Inclusion is not merely about putting all children into one school regardless of whether any learning takes place. It is also about including all marginalised groups in the learning process (including those marginalized based socioeconomic status, cultural background, disabilities, and gender). Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable as they often face a double handicap: one due to the disability and the other due to, for example, their gender, socioeconomic status, and /or cultural background. This double handicap makes the problem more complex. Deep-rooted

societal prejudices may prevent children with multiple disadvantage from fully participating in society and this starts with learning and progressing to decision making. Barriers to inclusion may exist at several levels and must also be addressed at several levels. For example, when schools do not provide a rewarding, quality education to meet the needs of a child and his/her family, the child may drop out of school. A child with multiple disadvantage—for example, a young girl from a scheduled tribe—may have teachers who do not wish to deal with her. Physical barriers may further cause difficulty in accessing schools. A wheelchair user may not be able to access a school on the top of a hill, cross a river or move on difficult terrain. Last but not least, the most difficult barrier may be the prevailing attitude within educational institutions, which could lead to discrimination and a toxic environment for the child with special needs.

Types of Barriers to Inclusion:

Children with special needs may face many interrelated challenges that further reduce their chance of attending school or participating in the teaching-learning process. Hence, it is important to understand all possible barriers to inclusion. Barriers to inclusion can be divided into three broad categories: attitudinal, structural and systemic or educational.

1. Attitudinal barriers:

UNICEF's recent report on the State of the World's Children (2013) identified attitudes as a major barrier to inclusion. Within schools, teachers' negative attitudes, which primarily emanate from ignorance and a lack of knowledge, have a tremendous negative impact on the climate within the class and school. There are widespread assumptions about notions of 'normality' and many myths exist that are never questioned or critiqued. For example: Many teachers assume that children with disabilities lack academic ability. They believe that the child's impairment is the problem and problems need to be fixed. And if they cannot be fixed, then they have to be 'managed'. Thus, the child with special needs is given no attention or priority when teachers plan classroom transactions.

- Teachers working with children with disabilities from poor economic backgrounds fault their parents for the children's poor learning outcomes. Though teachers realise that many of them are first generation learners and may not have a home environment conducive to learning, they are not quick to address the child's specific needs.
- Many teachers believe that children with disabilities cannot cope with the regular curriculum in mainstream classrooms as they need special and segregated set-ups. They also believe that other children may not be comfortable being with children who look and behave differently. They feel they cannot accept as their responsibility or as an integral part of their work the education of all children. They often look to special/resource teachers to take responsibility for children with disabilities, and work with them in a separate room. There is also a strong feeling among many 'regular' teachers that accepting the responsibility of a child with a disability will prevent them from giving time to the 'normal' children. The teacher's low expectation of a child with special needs tends to lead to low self-concept and poor performance. In short, the difficulty faced by a child with special needs is not due to their impairment, but in how others view them. In other words, the disability can be attributed to people's attitudes and perspectives towards the child with special needs.

2. Structural barriers:

Structural barriers can be physical as well as the way the education system is organised. Some of the architectural barriers can be steps, uneven ground, and furniture randomly placed or in wrong places, which may be a barrier for children with visual and/or mobility impairment. Barriers may also exist in the way schools are built, e.g. no railing support and signage for children with visual impairment, inaccessible toilets, playgrounds and laboratories, etc. School management and School Development and Management Committees (SDMCs) should pay attention to these and work together to ensure a barrier-free environment in the school. This may involve constructing ramps (at the required gradation) and railings to the classrooms, providing easy access to drinking water, having disabled-friendly toilets with water facility, ensuring even ground in the school premises for children, especially to enable children with loco-motor disability to move around more easily. If required, in a multi-story building, they should arrange classes on the ground floor for children who may not be able to use stairs.

3. Systemic or educational barriers:

Curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation procedures are the primary educational barriers that contribute to pushing marginalized and disadvantaged children out of the education system. When curriculum is not flexible, children have difficulty coping with it. The methods and classroom transactions do not take into account the needs of children with sensory limitations or intellectual disabilities and this creates barriers to learning. The lack of knowledge in handling children with disability also presents a big barrier. Therefore, understanding children with special needs is an essential factor for developing inclusive education. The lack of resources for teachers is yet another systemic barrier that must be addressed.

Conclusion:

The impact of policies and programmes of various governments have brought children with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups into mainstream schools. Now, the challenge is on how schools can include all children and enable them to fully participate in learning. An inclusive learning environment makes it possible for all children, from different backgrounds and of varying abilities, to participate in and learn. It means teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment for all children, which provides equitable opportunities for participating and learning in the classroom. Therefore, first and foremost, teachers need to understand and value the diversity that children with disability add to the classroom.

Resources:

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