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Inclusion in primary education: A philosophical probability or practical feasibility?

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Abstract

Every child has the right to develop to her full potential and schools are expected to offer a stimulating experience that nurtures learning by all students. But children are different from each other and among them diversities exist on various dimensions like physical, intellectual, social and financial. Allowing all children access to opportunities of quality education is a prerequisite for the development for all nations. Yet, in India thousands of children drop out of primary school each year and more than a quarter of these are ultimately deprived of any other educational opportunity. This situation is an enormous waste of financial and human resources; it jeopardizes the future of many children and will have very negative consequences for the future development of India. Inclusion is a process, not a fixed state. By inclusion, we mean not only that children with special needs should wherever possible receive their education in a mainstream school, but also that they should join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school. Many schools will need to review and adapt their approaches in order to achieve greater inclusion in primary schools as Primary education is the core of the schooling system. It builds the bedrock for human capital development. The objective of this study is to accurately capture the situation of those children who are not in schools, causes of their exclusion and in order to come up with appropriate strategies to improve their inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusion, Primary education, Children with special needs, challenges

Introduction

"Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structure which exist in our societies; it is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone. Inclusion is about creating a better world for everyone." - Diane Richler

Inclusive Education

The concept of 'inclusive education' has varied considerably over time; it was originally used to refer to the education of children with 'special needs' in mainstream schools. Following the World Education Forum in it was restated that Education for All must take into account the needs of all children. The concept of inclusive education has been widened to promote access to and retention in formal education systems for all children with special needs, whether these are health related, socio-economical, geographical, and cultural or related to learning difficulties. Inclusion is therefore seen as a process of recognising the diverse educational needs of all children in schools. The idea is that the regular education system must not exclude any child. The concept of providing quality education is thus strongly highlighted since the main aim is to promote the strengths and flourish academic, social, emotional and physical characteristics of each child. Inclusive education seeks to ultimately respond, in a positive manner, to the varied needs of students and celebrate diversity as an opportunity to enrich learning.

Rationale & Rights of Inclusive Education

There are a number of rationales underlie the approach for inclusive education. Socially, educating all children together is one way to change attitudes and foster a society without discrimination. The economic rationale emphasizes that it is less costly to create and maintain schools that educate all children together rather than developing a complex system of special schools for catering different needs of children.

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From educational point of view, this need to educate all children together involves developing teaching methods that respond to individual differences. An inclusive education system can only exist if mainstream schools adopt a more inclusive approach, that is to say, they succeed in educating all children in their communities. The overall goal of inclusive education is ultimately to strengthen the education system's ability to reach all learners and is therefore a key strategy for achieving Education for all. We want to see more students with special needs included in mainstream schools. We support the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Salamanca World Statement on Special Needs Education 1994, the United Nations Education for All initiative, which was launched in Jomtien, Thailand (1990), and the UNICEF, These call on governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise. That suggests the progressive extension of the capacity of mainstream schools to provide for children with different needs. In the crux of inclusive education is the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 which states, "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening

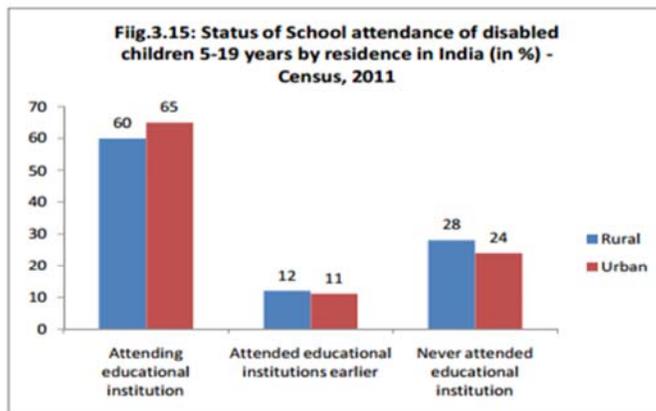
of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace." (Article 26-Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Status of Education of children with special needs in India

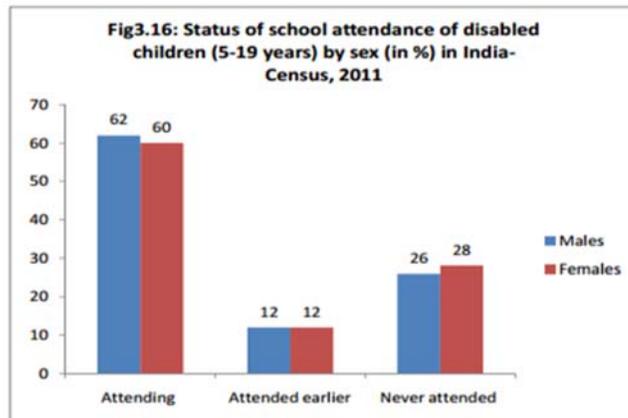
The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes that Persons with Disabilities are valuable human resource for the country and seeks to create an environment that provides equal opportunities, protection of their rights. To promote the national objective, there is a need for collection, compilation and analysis of data on disability. According to the Census 2011(Registrar General of India, 2011), there are 2,68,10,557 persons with disability in India who constitute 2.21 per cent of the overall population. This includes eight different types of disabilities. An approximated 69.5 per cent of people with disabilities live in the rural regions of the state.

The Census 2011 showed that, at all India level, among the total disabled persons, 45% are illiterates. 13% of the disabled population has matriculation / secondary education but are not graduates and 5% are graduates and above. Nearly 8.5% among the disabled literates are graduates.

- The rate of school attendance of disabled children (5-19 years) is higher in urban areas (65%) compared to rural areas (60%).



- Among all the female disabled children (5-19 years), 60% are attending institutions, while among the male disabled children the 62% are attending educational institutions.



Among the male disabled persons, 38% are illiterates. 16% of the disabled male population has matriculation/secondary education but are not graduates and 6% are graduates and above. About 9% among the male disabled literates are graduates. Among the female disabled persons, 55% are illiterates. 9% of the disabled female population has matriculation/secondary education but are not graduates and 3% are graduates and above. About 7.7% among the female disabled literates are graduates. Illiteracy was high among female disabled in rural areas.

Children who are excluded from primary schools

According to quantitative survey of India 2011, children who never enrolled in primary school are orphans, children with disabilities, children who are related to income generating activities or children who live far away from any school. Children who enrolled in primary school but drop out before completion, tend to be either disabled, children who have to work harder and longer hours to earn money, the eldest child in their family, children living a long way from school, or children who have lower academic achievement levels and receive less support from their parents than those children who are still in school. Disabled children who reach up to third grade are often those who have mild disability in comparison to other disabled children, and they also started primary school earlier and went to the doctor more often. The education level of the parents and other children in the household, the degree of importance placed on education by the parents and the quality of housing, are all significantly lower for families of those children who have dropped out of school. In comparison to school going children, school dropouts are malnourished. Children who drop out of primary education often come from poor background, or from families that have experienced sudden reductions in income. The positive attitude of the principal, teachers, parents and the degree to which the school can adapt to a child's disability, positively influences a disabled child's education.

Causes of exclusion from Primary Schools

Extending access to education is part of a worldwide agenda. Researches show that across the world, there are many reasons why children do not attend school. These reasons are following:

- Issues related with family are financial problems, health problems and a poor view of education plays a significant role in the school exclusion phenomenon at the family level. These issues provoke phenomena such as child labour, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction and unsafe pregnancy etc. Reports on juvenile crime (Utting, Bright & Henricson, 1993; ^[11] suggest that the risk of crime is increased by a number of factors including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, social isolation, poor parenting, family conflict and breakdown, and school failure. Children most at risk are those where several of these factors occur together. Lack of achievement, behavioural problems, truancy and exclusion from school are predictive of subsequent involvement in crime (West, 1982; Hagell & Newburn, 1994; Ouston, 1984) ^[12]. It would therefore seem important to attempt to maintain all children in full-time mainstream education.
- From schools' point of factors responsible for the school exclusion include school fees, poor quality of

education and difficult study conditions such as the distance to, and accessibility of, schools, discriminatory attitude of principals, teachers and bullying by other students.

- At the societal level, notions of social roles, negative attitude towards disabilities, low levels of commitment to encounter school exclusion, insecurity and susceptibility to natural disasters, all lead to high levels of school exclusion. Lack of adequate support from the government also affects cost, quality and access to schools.

Key players in support of inclusion

Throughout the world, there is an increased awareness of differences in access to and outcomes of education. This has to be understood that education has power to reduce poverty, to improve the lives of individuals and groups, and to transform societies (e.g. Grubb & Lazerson, 2004) ^[6]. Teachers, parents, communities, school authorities, curriculum planners, training institutes and entrepreneurs in the business of education are among the stakeholders that can serve as valuable resources in support of inclusion. Some (teachers, parents and communities) are more than just a valuable resource; they are the key to supporting all aspects of the inclusion process. This involves a willingness to accept and promote diversity and to take an active role in the lives of students, both in and out of school. The optimal learning environment for inclusion depends largely upon the relationship among teachers, parents, other students and society. Ideally, effective inclusion involves implementation both in school and in society at large. Although there is universal support for inclusion at a philosophical level, there are some issues that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways. Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000) ^[2] conducted a survey which included teacher perceptions of inclusive education for students of special educational needs. The results from the above study indicated that teachers supported the concept of inclusion, but they did not have sufficient time, training, or resources to implement it. Inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for develop schools in which all children can learn together and have feeling of belongingness. In this task, teachers are crucial because of the pivotal role they play in promoting participation and reducing exclusion, particularly with children with disabilities. The teacher's main role is to educate and interact with the children and their parents, to improve the school environment and to keep an eye on individual students. The importance of preparing teachers who can teach in inclusive classrooms following an inclusive pedagogy has been referred to in the National Curriculum Framework for teacher education (NCFTE), 2009. It has been shown that teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion depend strongly on their experience with learners who are perceived as "challenging". Teacher education, the availability of support within the classroom, class size and overall workload are all factors which influence teachers' attitudes. Several studies like (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczyński, 2002) ^[4] have revealed that negative attitudes of teachers and adults (parents and other family members) are the major barrier to inclusion; children do not have prejudices unless adults show them.

Principals' tasks involve educating and collaborating with parents, supervising teachers and students and working to improve study conditions. In addition to educating parents and children, the parents' association should be responsible for all communication and school dynamics as well as provide support for the principal, teachers, parents and children. Parents should be responsible for the guidance and supervision of their children, they should provide financial support and study materials, deal with any communication with the principal and teachers, as well as provide outreach services for those parents with out-of school children. Apart from respecting guidance from their teachers and parents, students should play a role in raising awareness and identifying out-of-school children as well as supporting and encouraging other students not to drop out. Lastly, the government should deal with the management of teachers, provide schools with financial and material support and encourage local initiatives.

Strategies for fostering inclusion in schools

One of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of children who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities. Such a society is neither efficient nor safe. Here are few suggestions for increasing inclusion in schools.

- **Responding to diversity:** Respect for diversity creates a welcoming environment for all. We should acknowledge and respect differences in children, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, language and disabilities as it has direct effects on their growth. Research shows that more diverse environments increase all students' level of critical thinking, raise levels of their knowledge and awareness, challenge assumptions, and raise levels of their contact connections and communications. A study by Baker, Wang and Walberg in 1994 concluded that "special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than comparable students in non-inclusive settings."
- **Role of government:** The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006 (PWD) voiced the need for mainstreaming of persons with disabilities in the general education system through inclusive education, identification of children with disabilities through regular surveys, enrolment in appropriate and disabled friendly schools till successful completion of education. More recently the RTE Amendment Act (2012) stated that "disadvantaged groups" includes children with disabilities and thus all the rights provided to children belonging to disadvantaged group shall apply to children with disabilities also. Under India's 2009 Right to Education (RTE) Act, every child up to the age of fourteen is guaranteed free and compulsory education. Government has already taken many initiatives like mid-day meal schemes, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, "Beti bachao beti padhao" yojana for promoting girl child education. However, proper implementation of such schemes is important. According to MHRD Even after 7 years, there are only 10% schools which are complying with the norms of RTE.
- **Context of the Evaluation:** As introduced by the Government of India, the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) framework, which focuses on restructuring teaching-learning and testing practices. The CCE framework replaces "high-risks" year-end exams with more frequent evaluation of student performance across academic and non-academic dimensions. By monitoring students' progress at regular intervals, the program is expected to help teachers modify their lessons plans based on current learning levels. The program is also believed to reduce pressure on students by giving them various opportunities to demonstrate their skills and improve performance. CCE is very helpful in increasing inclusion.
- **Insure adequate support in the classroom:** Schools must have ramps, railings, disabled friendly toilets, sanitation and barrier free environment. These facilities are very important for the students with disabilities to cope up within the inclusive setting. If all the supports and facilities related to infrastructure and physical environment in the school are provided it will be more accessible for the students with special needs which leads to success in inclusive setting.
- **Role of teachers:** Supporting teachers is a crucial factor for the promotion of inclusive education. Support can be about many things like making use of available resources to support learning. At the heart of the process of inclusion is an emphasis on making better use of resources. This includes developing ways of working that make better use of human energy through greater cooperation between teachers, support staff, parents and the learners themselves. Researches prove that better use of child-to-child co-operation can help in contribution of the development of a more inclusive education in ways that will improve conditions for all learners. The lack of teaching-learning materials and various forms of printed media for teachers and learners may avert the quality of education. Teachers need support for their work in terms of infrastructure and educational materials so that they can prepare their lessons and update their own knowledge.
- **Involving parents and community:** Parents should have a right to be involved in all decision-making concerning their child. They should be seen as partners in the education process. Lack of awareness among parents results in exclusion of children from schools as they are poor, illiterate and are unaware of the importance of education, and they feel education of disabled children are futile. Emphasise importance to primary education through sensitization programmes for parents and community leaders. The community should be responsible for controlling and sanctioning school exclusion and for raising external support.
- **Role of media:** Media play an important role in increasing of public awareness and collect the views, information and attitudes toward inclusive growth. In this decade of knowledge and awareness there is a huge and grand role of media to develop inclusive culture within the society. It is all around us when we watch on television, listen to on the radio, read to the books, magazines, and newspapers, everywhere we want to collect some knowledge and information and a part of this media has to present a very responsible role for creating inclusive society through between the line dialogues.
- **Getting support from NGO's:** To meet the quantity and quality of inclusive education needs, it is essential

to get support from NGOs and other existing private organisations. These organizations can play a key role in achieving this goal and developing a critical mass that creates awareness and advocates for inclusion. By organizing seminars, trainings and disseminating information, NGOs can support parents and children with information on their legal rights i.e. the commitments governments have made under international law, as well as national legislation and regulations and provide information on what services are available and how to access them.

Conclusion

A general awareness and accountability of everyone regarding inclusion must materialize and lead to a programme of concrete actions to respond directly and quickly to this challenge of school exclusion. A veritable plan to fight against school exclusion could be used to implement some of the much needed actions such as promoting a culture of inclusive education, the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, trained teachers, proper infrastructure, a pro-vulnerable regulatory framework, expanded partnerships to foster innovative programmes and communication activities and targeted action packages for families, schools and communities. Highly appropriate and carefully implemented, these strategies could represent a real opportunity for India to put a stop to school exclusion and ultimately offer quality education to all its children.

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