Inclusion is the Way Forward

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The article makes a case for including children with special needs in the regular school system highlighting the multiple interpretations of inclusive education in India and how these impact its interpretations for policy. The author urges individual effort on part of schools to adopt teaching and learning practices that support the learning needs of children with special needs and in effect improve learning for all the children in the classroom.

It would not be erroneous to state that educational discourse in India has been largely unresponsive to the challenges of education of children with disabilities until the recent past. With impetus provided to the 'Education For All' (EFA) adage by the implementation of the Right to Education Act (RtE), it is now being increasingly acknowledged that including children with disabilities into the mainstream is pertinent to achieving the EFA goal. This paper presents a brief overview of the multiple understandings of inclusive education and its interpretations for policy and makes a case for initiative on part of schools to embrace inclusive practices to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all its pupils.

Inclusive Education in the Indian Context

'Inclusion and exclusion are not uniform categories. Each situation is shaped by its own historical, cultural, global and contextual influences' (Barton & Armstrong, 2007).

As a phenomenon that has gained recognition in India only in the recent past, arriving at a consensus definition and developing a clear understanding of inclusion both as a concept and as an ideology has been predictably hard. Referred to as a phenomenon that originated from a western mindset, inclusion has been dismissed and often misunderstood. Singal (2005) stated that inclusive education is "…a concept that has been adopted from the international discourse, but has not been engaged with in the Indian scenario" (p.9). In another context, she says that the use of the term inclusive education appeared more fancy and politically correct and hence was adopted by practitioners and policy planners without necessarily developing a clear understanding of the notion behind it (Singal, 2006). It was only as recently as in the 90s that some voices arose in support of the ideals of inclusive education in India. Jangira (1995) and Kaur and Karanth (1993) warned against the disregard of the western paradigm. They emphasized that this repudiation was likely to postpone the attainment of the goal of EFA.

Difficulty in developing a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education has also stemmed from the fact that the term has often been interchangeably used with integration. Whereas the use of terms like 'mainstreaming' and 'integration' with reference to education of the disabled is well-documented in policy and legal taxonomy, inclusive education has been a recent entrant. As Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) pointed out, inclusive education originated as a challenge to the restrictions imposed by the existing models of mainstreaming and integration. It is pertinent that the two concepts be recognized as distinct not only in meaning and ideological affiliation, but also their diverse implications for practice. Whereas integration pertains to a locational or geographical and social integration of children with special needs in regular classrooms, where readiness of the child with the disability is considered as a precondition for its success, inclusion subscribes to a 'whole school' approach wherein schools are urged to become adaptable and inclusive in their day to day educational practices for all students (Lindsay, 2007). While terminological ambiguity has tainted consensual understanding, inclusive education policy in India too has sundry interpretations.

Policy Support for Inclusive Education

In principle, inclusive education has been embraced as the way forward by all major establishments related to elementary education in India in general and disability in particular in the last two decades. Originating from the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which Ainscow and Cesar (2006) referred to as 'the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education' (p.231), inclusive education received widespread recognition across the world. In India, schemes such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children, (IEDC, 1974) launched by the Government of India and the Project Integrated Education of Disabled Children (PIED), launched during the Sixth Five Year Plan (1985-1989), had laid the foundation for inclusive education to be adopted at least in principle. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) adopted the inclusive education philosophy in 1997 (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007). The Persons with Disability Act (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) in 1995 emphatically stated the need for equal opportunities for persons with disability and directed state and local authorities to take appropriate action towards meeting the goal. Policy support for inclusion gained impetus with the launch of programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) during the Tenth Plan (2001) and the Right to Education Act, 2009. Undoubtedly an important milestone in India's struggle to achieve the elusive Education for All goal, the Act provided the much needed patronage for education of children with special needs as well (Madan & Sharma, 2013).

While there appears to be wholehearted policy support for inclusion on the surface, a closer examination leads one to the possibility of its multiple interpretations. For instance, Singal (2006) points towards how inclusive education can be interpreted

as an 'alternative system of education' in addition to the NIOS and the NFE programmes already available to children with disabilities. In her view, while there is emphasis on including children with disabilities into the education system, it does not necessarily imply the mainstream. Several studies conducted in private schools implementing inclusive education programmes (Sandhill & Singh, 2005); Singal & Rouse (2003); Madan & Sharma (2013) have found schools creating separate units, referred to as Resource Rooms for admitting children with disabilities. Such an arrangement in the name of inclusion not only creates physical barriers between the children, but also restricts their participation in educational and co-curricular activities in the mainstream. Several such evidences indicate that even though support for inclusive education in India looks promising in policy, there is wide incongruity in its interpretations and practice.

Adopting Inclusive Practices at School Level

In this light, it would perhaps be germane for schools to develop an informed understanding of inclusion on their own and discover how they could participate in making their school environments inclusive. The author calls for involvement of both private and public players in the process as participation in this national agenda is a responsibility that everyone must share equally. The importance of school in empowering and playing a mitigating factor in the lives of children with special needs has been found by several researchers in India and elsewhere (Chhuakling, 2010; Conners & Stalker, 2003; Vyas, 2008 as cited in Sharma & Sen, 2012). Having said that, it is imperative for schools to understand that an inclusive education programme in a school cannot exist as an appendage. It requires holistic involvement and participation of school personnel at all levels of administration and academic decision making. Unless a school wholeheartedly embraces the ideology in principle and in practice, it is unlikely to meet with success.

There is often a tendency for schools to view adopting inclusive practices as an added burden, something that saddles them with increased challenges for developing separate curriculum and learning new teaching techniques. This view presumably arises from the belief that working with children with special needs involves specialist pedagogy that teachers must learn in order to work with them. In turn, this understanding has evolved from the widely prevalent deficit versus the differential model which views children with disabilities as being qualitatively different from other children. Recent developments in the field founded on empirical research however suggest that instead of emphasizing on adopting distinctive teaching approaches, educators should focus on embracing teaching practices that are adaptations of existing ones and could benefit all the children in the classroom and not just those with special needs. As Florian (2009) puts it, "a pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners is based on principles of teaching and learning that reject deficit views of difference and deterministic views about ability but see individual differences as part of the human condition" (p. 49). In the same vein, recommendations have been forthcoming for differentiated instruction and classrooms. In such instruction according to Waldron and McLeskey (2001), the teacher creates different levels of expectations and task completion using the same lesson or unit. Such a classroom is responsive to varying readiness levels, profiles and interests of all its pupils. There is, of course, no denying the fact that children with severe impairments may not benefit from this approach and may need intervention beyond the classroom.

It must be noted here that, in addition to addressing needs of children with mild disabilities who are excluded from the mainstream, inclusive pedagogy also benefits hundreds of children already present in regular classrooms who are affected by mild to moderate learning difficulties which go largely undetected and untreated. These children carry the risk of becoming dropouts due to poor school performance and may suffer from irreparable psychological and emotional trauma throughout their growing up years besides never being able to achieve academic success.

An inclusive school therefore, is one that accepts a value system that celebrates diversity, respects individual differences among its pupils and adopts teaching practices that profit all the children in the classroom and not just those with special needs. By taking lead in this endeavour, schools that express a sense of ownership towards implementing inclusive practices will not only imprint their participation in the Education for All goal but will also pave the way for others to follow. Let there be no doubt that inclusion is the way forward for this country to provide quality and meaningful education to all its children, and participation in this national agenda is no longer a matter of choice.

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