

CHALLENGING EXCLUSION: ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Inclusive Education in India being still in an evolving stage, necessitates a re-look at the steps taken so far for inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream education, and reassessing strategies for inclusion becomes all the more essential to address the pertinent issues and concerns needing attention, to promote inclusivity. With inclusive education, emerges the need of shift in attitude, availability and accessibility of infrastructure, pedagogy, need-based instructional methods, materials and the means of delivery, assessment and evaluation, and the much evident issue of acceptance at all levels in the education system. The policy recognition of the various disabilities, the available assistive educational provisions, the level of awareness in the country regarding the policies and provisions in place for education of children with special needs and their level of access to these provisions, the emerging issues at the implementation level and the challenges faced on the road to inclusion, and the underlying perception of the different stakeholders involved in the education of children with special needs regarding inclusive education, are some of the significant points of concern and areas needing attention, to promote inclusion in the real sense. This paper attempts to examine the status of inclusive education in India in terms of the policy recognition and provisions, and the emerging issues and concerns in access and implementation of inclusive education that need to be addressed to help include the 'excluded' and make education truly inclusive.

Keywords: Children with Special Needs, Disabilities, Exclusion, Inclusive Education, Issues

Introduction

With the concept of inclusive education taking the center stage, and the shift in focus and approach for the education of children with special needs, from special schools to the regular schools, as per their capabilities and 'degree of disabilities' or 'differential abilities', education of 'children with disabilities' becomes more of a shared responsibility between the different stakeholders involved. At the same time, with the shift, comes the issue of shift in attitude, availability and accessibility of infrastructure, pedagogy, need-based instructional methods, materials and the means of delivery, assessment and evaluation, and the much evident issue of acceptance at all levels in the education system.

Inclusive education, more in tune with the social model of disability, sees the systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) as the ultimate factors defining disability. This leads to the realization that children in special schools are geographically and socially segregated from their peers, a failure of meaningfully integrating students in mainstream schools. Inclusive education therefore, more than mainstreaming the learners with special needs, is also concerned with identifying and overcoming all barriers for effective, continuous and quality participation of all in education (Ramchand and Dummugudem, 2014). Inclusion of children with disabilities hence specifically targets those children who are enrolled in school but are excluded from learning, those who are not enrolled in school but could participate if schools were more flexible in their responses, and also 'relatively small groups of children with severe disabilities who may require some form of additional support' (DFID). For understanding and promoting inclusion, it is essential to understand and address the issues leading to exclusion. Challenging exclusion thereby may serve in supporting inclusion in education.

The Policy Perspective

A disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being (WHO, 1980). The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, recommends the integration of the 'disabled' with the general community at all levels as equal partners, for preparing them for normal growth and enabling them to face life with courage and confidence (Mukhopadhyay and Mani, 2002).

The 'Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities, MHRD, 2005, states Inclusive Education as- 'an 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. It implies all learners, young people - with or without disabilities being able to learn together through access to common pre-school provisions, schools and community educational setting with an appropriate network of support services. Schools with Inclusive setting have a flexible education system, suiting the needs of a diverse range of learners and adapt itself to meet these needs accordingly. It aims at all stakeholders in the system (learners, parents, community, teachers, administrators, policy makers) to be comfortable with diversity and see it as a challenge rather than a problem.'

The Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (P.I.E.D.) launched in 1987, was the first pilot project on integrated education in India, as a joint venture of the MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) and UNICEF. Under PIED, there was a significant increase in the number of not only mildly disabled, but also severely disabled children, with the number of 'orthopedically handicapped' children far outstripping children in other disability categories. The success of P.I.E.D. led to the inclusion of Integrated Education of the Disabled (I.E.D.) under District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1997, which then evolved strategies to provide resource support to those children with special needs who were enrolled in DPEP schools, with a thrust on imparting quality education to all disabled children. The government, committed to provide education through mainstream schools for children with disabilities in accordance with PWD Act, 1995 introduced special interventions and strategies like pedagogic improvement and adoption of child centered practices focusing on the children with disabilities. The Integrated

Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) Scheme, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme of the government aimed at providing suitable educational opportunities to Children with Special Needs in regular schools to facilitate their achievement and retention, under which every school was expected to enroll children with disabilities. The most important characteristic of this scheme was the liaison between special schools and regular schools. Under IEDC, the government also made provision for aids, incentives and specially trained teachers in state run schools (Planning Commission, 2002). Recently, though the Government has focused much of its attention on SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), and although the zero rejection policy of SSA focuses on inclusive education to help ensure that all can take advantage of education, however, the difficulty lies in transferring this philosophy to the field. Various initiatives for teaching of children with special needs in mainstream schools are being taken, but still 95 percent of CWSN are out of mainstream schools. Even the schools where Inclusive Education is in practice, infrastructural facilities required for inclusive teaching-learning processes are poor. Capability of teachers, required to teach children with special needs along with normal children, also appears to be poor reflecting the poor quality of training for Inclusive Education (UNICEF, 2003). The only point of satisfaction in this regard appears to be the recognition and attention that Inclusive Education is receiving by the government now, for the provision of universal education to children with special needs under Inclusive Education.

The 'disability' classification, in India, as laid down in the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995, discusses seven kinds of 'disabilities' namely 'blindness, low vision, hearing impairment, locomotor, leprosy cured, mental illness and mental retardation' (Das and Kuttumari). The PWD Act 1995 though lacks a mention of 'Learning Disability' as a disability under the broader umbrella of disabilities outlined in the Act. Though mention is made of the same in the name of 'Dyslexia' in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan; still as the Scheme 'Scheme of Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids/Appliances' (ADIP Scheme) recognizes definitions of the various disabilities as stated in the 'Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995', therefore, this Scheme as well does not recognize 'Learning Disability' as a 'disability', for extension of the assistive services to the Learning Disabled as is available for persons with other disabilities. This Policy gap further marginalizes children with Learning Disabilities, leaving them with little hope for assistance and support. In such a situation, the various efforts being made by the Education Boards in the country, have at least helped these children from dropping out of the education system, in struggling to meet the educational level and demands at par with their non disabled peers in the schools (Ahmad, 2014). Yet parents in villages and rural areas are usually unaware of the services available for their children with Learning Disabilities and thus need to be informed (Soni, 2004).

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, (2006) mandates to include the persons with disabilities in the general education system, though 'general system' as such is not defined in concrete terms as being implying the mainstreaming of children with disabilities in regular schools, or the provision of the same type of education that is provided in the special schools. The policy generally focuses only on resources and physical access to regular schools or infrastructure rather than access to flexible curriculum, and pedagogy, and hence fails to consider what happens in the regular classroom, and whether the children with disabilities

included in the mainstream are being provided flexible school environment and services ranging from curriculum to pedagogy and assessment (Mukhopadhyay and Mani, 2002). Also, the policy often repeats general commitments of the PWD Act 1995, and remains more general on concrete strategies for implementing them, with limited reference to the role of PWD themselves in policy development and on implementation, monitoring and evaluation. For want of an insight into the shortcomings of current policy and practice, the government's own assessments indicate serious implementation problems, as simply reiterating the general commitments of the PWD Act is unlikely to be sufficient to reinvigorate the disability sector. Further, 'a dichotomy exists between the policy and practice in inclusive education in India, where the government promotes the 'inclusionist' philosophy through its schemes and simultaneously supports the 'segregationist' policy by promoting the idea of special schools through their assistance to voluntary organization schemes' (Alur, 2003 in Das, A.). The government's most recent assessment of performance at the Central and State level indicates that overall implementation performance of the PWD Act 1995 has been poor, and in a number of areas very poor, with an overall evaluation that the "act is being poorly implemented" even after several years of its enactment. Hence, despite the promotion of inclusive education in the policy documents of the government, inclusive education has been the mere inclusion of the children with disabilities in the education system, but not specifically the mainstream (Singal, 2005). The Policy commitment of the government remains largely unfulfilled (World Bank, 2007), and it has failed to bring children with disabilities into the mainstream education (Julka, 2005).

Challenging Exclusion

Education is the most essential ingredient for the development and empowerment of individuals and the nation. And inclusion in education, irrespective of the varied socio-cultural differences and the differences in abilities and disabilities, undoubtedly makes this foundation much stronger (Ahmad, 2014). Though 'Inclusive education' policy has been introduced in India, however the concept is still in its infancy (Das and Kuttumari). Children with special needs are generally termed 'disabled' or 'children with disabilities' and have the choice of inclusive schools/regular schools or schools exclusively meant for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities, comprising a heterogeneous group, deserve equal access to opportunities even if the nature and severity of the disability poses individual/disability specific experiences and challenges. With the concept of inclusive education still evolving in India, with no set standards for schools, the schools tend to benefit and encourage students with disabilities, while may also deter their full participation in school proceedings (Bookhart, 1999).

A corpus of literature on integration and inclusion, though mostly being opinion-based, reasons the concept of inclusion and integration on grounds of 'equal opportunities', 'human rights' or the virtues of 'social inclusion'; but is generally found to be poorly argued with 'scant reference to the relevant philosophical literature'. Moreover, the description of classroom practice and the course of education is generally not evaluated in terms of long-term outcomes like the 'quality of life' or 'employability in adult life' later; the criteria of evaluation; or its applicability across different types of the special educational needs and across the different contexts. The field therefore is perhaps 'dominated by discourse rather than

research, by conjecture rather than evidence, by intuition rather than evaluation' (Bradley et. al., 1994).

With more than 18 million Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) mainly concentrated in rural areas, a large number of them belonging to poor SC/ST households, having poor hygiene and living conditions including malnutrition, inaccessibility to health care and dangerous working conditions, large number of children with special needs therefore lack access to schooling or are reported of dropping out of the education system early. Fewer than five percent of children who have a disability are in schools. The State's failure to provide them with basic education and health care is the main hurdle for them, besides also in their inaccessibility in getting reservation benefits either through SC/ST or PH reservation criteria (World Bank, 2007; Mehrotra, 2012). The education system therefore even being inclusive does not imply the same as what inclusion in mainstream or regular schools appears to be. Changes may take place if parents demand an appropriate environment and education for their children, and such a change needs to happen at the grassroots level. Even though the government policy takes a stand, individuals have to hold the government responsible for implementation (Soni, 2004).

Inclusion is a complex issue, and its conceptualization and practice is just as complex. The different axes of social exclusion need to be individually addressed, along with their compounded and intersectional influence on the enjoyment of rights. However, it must be firmly asserted that 'as social exclusion is produced through social processes, social inclusion is possible. It only requires conscious and concerted efforts' (CSEI). Disability, has started being recognized as a development issue (World Bank, 2007); and for effective inclusion of the children with disabilities in mainstream education and development, exclusion processes will have to be seen as an internal part of inclusion processes, and one cannot explore inclusion without investigating exclusion (Hansen, 2012).

1. Level of Access and Implementation

The move towards inclusive education has highlighted the rights of the children with special needs to be educated in the mainstream classes along with their peers, wherein exploring teachers' knowledge, understanding and behavior is critical, since teachers, ultimately, are the key to educational change and improvement. Though, while they hold the major responsibility for teaching the child, they may be constrained by circumstances to address children's needs within defined categories, which often reflect medical models and particular diagnostic criteria (Lindsay and Thompson, 1997). For a better educational output from the children with special needs, as equal participants in the learning process; a pro-active approach is needed at the policy level, as also at the planning and implementation level, from the school administration, teachers, support staff, parents of the students and the different stakeholders involved, to participate and coordinate in the planning and practice of need-based educational strategies, and be better equipped with the necessary skills required to assist the children, as per their role and capacities to help assist them in performing well in education and life.

a) Attitude and Perception

In India, generally the degree of disability is found to play a key role in the decision to include certain children or not, in the mainstream, and children who appear physically too different or those having some mental illness or low IQ are often not

included and their entry remains barred. Inclusive schools are also seen to enroll only those children having mild disabilities. Parental support is also an issue when securing an admission, where the willingness of the parents of the children with special needs to take extra responsibility of sharing the workload with the resource teachers, meeting the physical needs of their child (if required), constant monitoring and facilitation of their child's progress, arrangement of transport etc., is observed to be a significant factor in deciding if the child could get an admission in the school. Also, often the schools are seen to just meeting the formality of mainstreaming children with disabilities, because of the government's pressure, pressures from the upper class parents for their own children with disabilities to be educated in the regular schools, or because the schools want to prove themselves innovative in a highly competitive market (Singal, 2003). Therefore the primary challenge for children with special needs who aspire to join an inclusive school, is to secure an admission, as the eligibility criteria of these schools often appears to be stringent.

Parents, of children transitioned into mainstream classrooms, believe their child of having positive social and academic gains which their child would not have made in segregated educational settings (Caldwell, 2010). Also, the relationships between students, with and without disabilities, develop into better, meaningful, long lasting friendships (Amado, 1993) and working with heterogeneous pairs helps in increasing social interactions (Kamps, et. al., 1994). Non-disabled students experience an increase in self-esteem as a result of their relationship with children with disabilities (Peck et al., 1992; Voeltz and Brennan, 1983), while also their relationship with a classmate with disabilities elevate their status in class and in school (Lindsey, 2007). Non-disabled students also tend to be more committed to their personal, moral and ethical principles owing to their relationship with students with disabilities (Peck et al., 1990). Advocacy by students, for peers with disabilities, in terms of support, is found to be more regular in inclusive settings (Artiles, et.al, 2006; Lindsey, 2007).

b) Level of Acceptance and Participation

Although some schools are inclusive, 'acceptance' is based on the school's capability to provide services, and therefore, is not guaranteed. Until recently, children with disabilities were placed in 'self-contained programs', who in inclusive education, become part of the 'mainstream education'. Still, most of the time, attending the mainstream school appears just a 'norm', for these children and being out of these schools may 'exacerbate the difference and marginalize vulnerable children further'. Besides there is a practice of selective inclusion of the children with disabilities in the mainstream, especially in the private schools (Jha, 2010).

The peers in school, being the closest on par, play an important role in the lives of the children with disabilities. Acceptance by peers is as much a greater challenge for children with disabilities, as often, they are an easy target for being teased and bullied by their non-disabled peers (Mishna, 2003). Social attributes are found to be a major problem for children with disabilities where negative peer attitude proves to be a major barrier for social inclusion, and lack of close friends with similar disabilities is a contributing factor (Mcdougall et al., 2004). There is general support for the hypothesis that children who lack acceptance by peers are generally at risk for difficulties later in life (Ochoa and Olivarez Jr., 1995), while the vulnerability of being bullied cuts across all types of disabilities (Smith and Tippet, 2007).

A major barrier which the children with disabilities often experience is the attitude of regular teachers (Agbenyega, 2007; Wall, 2002; Yu et al., 2011). Mostly regular teachers consider children with disabilities as the responsibility of the resource teachers, and feel them to be a 'disturbance' to the class and as causing distractions which delay course completion. Hence, they choose to ignore their presence and concentrate on execution of their lesson plans (Das, A. and Kattumuri). In cases where children with disabilities believe that their teachers have a positive attitude towards them and invest time in helping them, often the teachers are found to pose questions to them in class but not encourage them to ask questions. So, while the intentions of the teachers are generally noble, they are unable to effectively engage students with special needs in the classroom (Fulk and Hirth, 1994; Gerber, 1992, Soni, 2004). Sometimes, teachers know very little about their students with special needs but have the willingness to learn (Sengupta and Biswas, 2003). However there is no evidence of acceptance of a total inclusion (Avranides and Norwitch, 2002). Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about students with disabilities and inclusive education affect their acceptance and also the commitment of regular teachers in implementing and promoting inclusion (Opdal and Wormnaes, 2001; Minke et. al., 1996; Villa et. al., 1996).

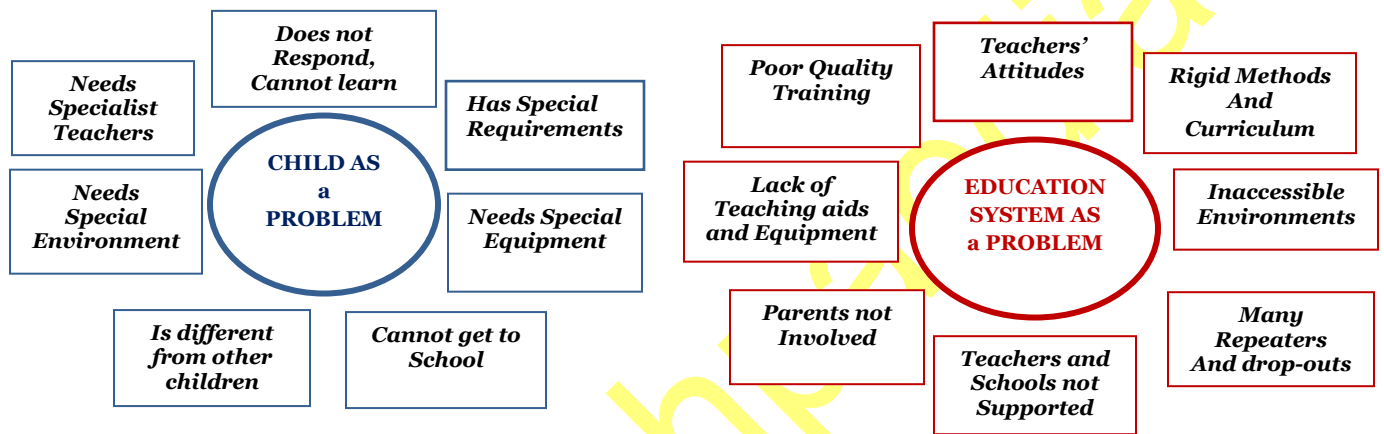
The attitude of the parents of non-disabled children also pose hindrance for inclusion in regular schools as they resist accepting that children with disabilities should be in the same class as their non-disabled child. Parents of the children with disabilities themselves, sometimes also prefer alternative schooling for their 'disabled' child for reasons like vocational gains, or to gain the benefit of medical rehabilitation, or simply to avoid bullying in regular schools. It is not necessary that the alternative educational institutions are always of sub-standard. They may offer higher quality teaching and learning processes than any regular local government school.' The special education is generally considered superior in India due to its preferred status (Mukhopadhyay and Mani, 2002). But the importance of mainstream in regular schools lies in the fact that special schools have limited coverage. Therefore, mainstreaming is the best option for the children with special needs, especially in the rural areas.

Also, many parents are not comfortable accepting their child's 'Learning Disability' and often lack the knowledge to use appropriate remedial education for learning difficulties. The social stigma of a Learning Disability often prevents parents from seeking appropriate remedies for children with Dyslexia (Stigma stands, 2004). Further, the lack of awareness prevents them from disclosing to their child's teacher what they know to be true about their child with special needs, when they are actually expected to declare the problem so that the school can assess the situation and provide the necessary support. 'Parents often resort to concealing the fact lest the school would reject admission.' They pretend ignorance and wait for the school to discover the child's special needs (Sundaram, 2006). The expectations and anguish of the parents is in some ways justified for want of empathy from the schools for atypically developing children. The lack of awareness in the community, parents, and teachers, about certain disabilities (including Learning Disabilities) and also regarding the provisions available for them, is yet another issue. While some teachers, administrators, professionals and parents, do seem to be aware of the concept of inclusive education, but are often not aware as to how it can be implemented in ordinary settings (Shahazadi, 2000; Crabtree and Williams, 2011).

c) Classroom Learning and Pedagogy

'Inclusion' implies more than the mere physical placement of 'special education students' in 'general education classrooms', and if the teaching learning relationship is re-structured as per the learning needs of the diverse learners, it can help schools in providing a truly well-rounded education. There are three pre-requisites for successful inclusion, namely- the preparation of the child, the preparation of the receiving schools, and the preparation of parents; and these cannot be achieved without the preparation of the teachers (Das et. al., 2013).

Fig.1. Integrated Education and Inclusive Education



Integrated Education

Inclusive Education

(Source: Policy Paper: Making inclusive education a reality. Sightsavers)

"Inclusive education is primarily about restructuring school cultures, policies and practices so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality. It sees individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning and for education systems to embrace change. It is a dynamic, continuing process of facilitating the participation of all students, including those with disabilities (DFID)."

In segregated settings, children with disabilities are educated at special schools or at home, while in integrated educational settings, children with disabilities attend special classes or units in mainstream schools. Inclusive Education implies the children with disabilities to effectively learn in mainstream schools where the whole system has been changed/re-structured to meet/accommodate the needs of the diverse learners. Therefore, rethinking the methods of service delivery, reorganization of the special education resources including time and staff, and the restructuring of the curriculum and instructional methods and assessment procedures of general education can help accommodate students with diverse educational needs.

Schools must develop innovative education programs, which provide supportive services in the general education classroom, and create a flexible core educational curriculum responsive to individual students' needs and diversities. Children with disabilities can attend resource room for special assistance in deficit areas, while spend the regular study hours in general classrooms with their non-disabled peers

(Smith et., al, 1993). A combination of resource room (for special assistance) and regular classroom teaching results in improved educational progress for students with mild disabilities (Lingard, 1994 and Martson, 1996). If schools fully include students with disabling conditions in general education classrooms, there can be a better utilization of resources and programs which are otherwise duplicated in special education and regular classrooms. Merging the two can help in sharing of expertise between the teachers; and also the special education teachers, paraprofessionals and therapists may spend lesser time in determination, classification and eligibility of students for special education programs and instead spend more time actually instructing them (Stainback and Stainback, 1984). This may also ensure a more individualized instruction, while also a better distribution of funds for the instructional materials and remedial services in education of children with special needs. While the general teachers have the skills to teach large groups of students and develop lesson plans, special educators can identify problems in the curriculum and devise effective teaching strategies to combat the difficulties faced by difficult learners. As a shared responsibility, both can help provide all students with a curriculum responsive to their individual needs (Stainback and Stainback, 1990; Ahmad, 2014). Adjustments must be made in the direct service commitments of the special educators to allow for the time to work with mainstream teachers cooperatively. A teachers' attitude towards the implementation of changes, reflects the attitudes of their administrators who are the key to facilitating, promoting or preventing such changes. It is therefore essential for the education administrators to view the task of making and implementing changes in the mainstream education as a significant necessity of the hour (Ahmad, 2014).

The school curriculum is a powerful tool (Swann, 1988), but may also become part of the problem (Das et. al., 2013). In the exam-oriented curriculum, teachers are usually observed to expect exceptional performance from their students in the exam, which serves as yet another barrier for mainstreaming (Mukhopadhyay and Mani, 2002). Some schools though, are now scrutinizing their curriculum with regard to the way it has failed these students, and as per the evidence of a downward effect which may, in the future, reduce the number of young people becoming alienated from education (Cullen and Campbell, 2000; Ahmad, 2014). The curriculum design and the learning plans therefore need to respond to physical, cultural and social preferences within the wide diversity of characteristics and needs of learners. The effort should be to enable the learner to appreciate beauty in its several forms (NCF, 2005).

The National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) lays down certain provisions for children with special needs to help them experience learning and achievement to the best of their potential. Accordingly, teaching and learning processes in the classroom need to be planned to respond to the diverse needs of the students, and teachers to explore positive strategies in collaboration with fellow teachers or with organizations outside the school. Adaptation of playgrounds, equipment and rules to make activities and games accessible to all children in the school, ensuring equality within the cultural and socio-economic diversity, are some of the initiatives highlighted for creating an enabling environment for children with special needs.

The constructive perspective supports strategies for promoting learning by all. A pedagogy that is sensitive to gender, class, caste and global inequalities does not merely affirm different individual and collective experiences but also locates these

within larger structures of power and reasoning. In particular, for girls and children from underprivileged social groups, classrooms need to be spaces for discussing processes of decision making, reasoning their decisions, and for making informed choices. Schools therefore need to become centres that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially the differently-abled, children from marginalized sections, and children in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education. The attempt to improve the quality of education will succeed only if it goes hand in hand with steps to promote equality and social justice (NCF, 2005).

Children learn through experience, making and doing things, experimentation, reading, discussion, asking, listening, thinking and reflecting, and expressing oneself in speech, movement or writing, and in numerous ways, both individually and together. Such opportunities need to be focused on in the course of their development. Also children and older learners can be involved in planning the class work; which may bring tremendous richness to the classroom processes and also allow teachers to respond to the special needs of some children without making them appear singled out (NCF, 2005). Alternative ways of classroom assessments, ensuring different means of re-enforcement and setting flexible rules and criteria can go a long way in encouraging creative expression, sustained learning, and equal and better participation in classroom learning.

2. Role of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

Disability, now being recognized as a development issue (World Bank, 2009), places a share of the responsibility on the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) as well to take disability perspective in mainstream development. The non-profit sector in India has a total of more than 1.2 million NGOs, which employ nearly 19.4 million persons, most of whom work on a voluntary basis (Srivastava and Tandon, 2005); but there are no comprehensive statistics on the number of NGOs working in the disability sector, though the number of organizations working on disability has increased. The disability NGO movement has had a significant contribution in promoting the interests of Persons with Disabilities and awareness of their rights and situation; still it remains in many ways an 'under-exploited resource' in terms of fully mature partnerships between the public and NGO sectors. While NGOs are indispensable in supplementing and supporting the efforts of the State, especially when market fails to be a reliable or accessible source of services, the NGOs working in the field of disability divide along several lines, where a strong urban bias is observed in presence and activities of these NGOs (Erb, 2002; NCPEDP, 1998). There is also a strong state-wise concentration of NGOs working on disability, with generally a stronger presence in the southern states in India. States like Rajasthan, where NGOs are very active, are not necessarily the ones with a concentration of the NGOs working on disability. Traditionally a strong focus of the NGOs working on disability has been on education and rehabilitation activities, though many are also found to be working on issues like access to justice, participation in voting etc, which to some extent reflects a difference between the focus of NGOs working on disability with a service delivery focus and those with an advocacy focus. The NGOs working on disability have been operational on varied traditions including Gandhian, Christian, Secular, Hindu, and Muslim, whereas in some sectors, some have had a strong presence of specific traditions, such as Christians as in Special Education. Besides, the Hindu religious organizations,

(with a notable exception of a few such as Rama Krishna Mission and Seva-in Action) have not been successful enough in mobilizing disability NGO activity, in comparison to groups like Jains and Parsees (Harris et. al., 2002). Cross-disability NGOs have emerged only recently, while majority of the disability NGOs have been on disability-specific basis. As a consequence, until recently the sector often did not speak with one voice (Lang, 2000).

The differences in government fund allocations to NGOs between states are not systematically related to the number of Persons with Disabilities in the state or their share in the national total PWD population. There is a need to reassess funds allocation across states for ensuring greater equity in NGO and PWD coverage. Also, the consultation between the public and NGO sector on disability policy issues remains under-developed, both at the Centre and in most States, where the role of NGOs sometimes is reduced to that of a watchdog of the public sector delivery mechanism. There are shortcomings in the capacity of the NGOs working on disabilities, to grow into an expanded role, both in their own rights and as a partner of the government, in terms of- coordination within the NGOs, inclusion of Persons with Disabilities themselves within NGOs, better internal systems for resource management and program monitoring and evaluation, skills-base of NGOs from the traditional core of special educators and rehabilitation professionals to newer skills like legal advice, ITC-related training capacity, etc. and in terms of their penetration in rural areas. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, NGOs remain a critical actor in promoting participation and inclusion of persons with special needs, as an alternate hope.

3. Inclusive Education: The Way Forward

A rights-based approach to disability and development calls for leveling the playing field so that people with disabilities can access jobs, education, health and other services. It implies the removal of physical and social barriers; adjustments of attitude for policy makers, employers, teachers, health care professionals and even family members, to ensure a universal design, accessible technology, and coordinated public programmes and services. The approach requires government to provide the resources necessary to implement these goals and to enforce penalties for those who refuse to cooperate (Disability Dialogue).

Ideally, “inclusive education means attending the age-appropriate class of the child’s local school, with individually tailored support” (UNICEF, 2007). In India, inclusive education is understood and practiced differently from the western world (Singal, 2007). Besides, there is “a tendency to be ‘politically correct’ by taking on current trends in the west without a real or common understanding of their meaning, resulting in dilution of service quality” (Kalyanpur, 2008; in Singal, 2007). If attending mainstream school is the ‘norm’, then being out of these schools can exacerbate the difference and marginalize vulnerable children further. There is the practice of selective inclusion of the children with disabilities in the mainstream, especially in the private schools (Jha, 2010). Attitude and acceptance at all levels of implementation, plays a key role in furtherance of ideologies and strategies for inclusion. Therefore, suitable alternatives should be explored for each dimension of the school and classroom process, and mainstream teachers to be encouraged to consider changes in their general procedures that would make greater use of the student's strengths while placing fewer demands on his/her deficit areas (Ahmad, 2014). An effective educational intervention should therefore focus on a student’s

individual strengths and needs and include well-defined goals, objectives, content, materials, and the necessary support like occupational and physical therapy, and assistive technology and devices, keeping in mind that it is at this stage when intervention efforts are most effective (Guralnick, 1997; Ahmad, 2014).

In an inclusive setting, the children with disabilities are in constant interaction with their typically developing peers without evident disabilities (Bookhart, 1999). While many of the differently-abled learners can learn basic language skills through normal social interactions, they could additionally be provided with especially designed materials that would assist and enhance their growth and development. Studying sign language and Braille could be included as options for learners without disabilities (NCF, 2005). As an alternative teaching-learning strategy, non-disabled students can also be encouraged to tutor students with disabilities (Ahmad, 2014); and with proper supervision, disabled students can also serve as tutors for younger students as well as their disabled and non-disabled peers (Gartner and Lipsky, 1990). Students with disabilities who serve as tutors or act as tutees are found to acquire social and academic benefits, and the tutors irrespective of their ability/disability acquire greater self-esteem (Osguthorpe and Scruggs, 1986). The school culture having an indirect association with attitude through interpersonal support from teachers is observed to have an effect on the student teacher relationship at the school level (Dutta and Banerjee). Also, development of friendship, congenial behaviour, advocacy, and acceptance and lower degrees of abusive behaviour in inclusive schools serve as the positive outcomes of inclusive education (Bunch and Valeo, 2004). In addition to co-operative teaching and cooperative learning like 'peer tutoring', parents can be involved, teachers can coach each other and the teaching staff can collaborate in instructional planning (Saint-Laurent, et. al., 1998). Co-operation as an overall approach can help the school organization in creating a climate of shared responsibility. The division of responsibilities needs to be clear (Jenkins, et. al., 1991).

Experiences from the western countries suggest that such educational reforms have not been easy to implement, and school systems are generally resistant to change and to the introduction and implementation of new ideas, especially if they have incompetent staff lacking the necessary skills and knowledge to implement the desired change (Das, et. al., 2013; Kuyini and Desai, 2007). Negative attitudes of teachers and their lack of skills often impede the successful implementation of inclusive education programs (Das, et. al., 2013; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996, Swaroop, 2001). The university personnel in India designing the training programs for regular school teachers need to make a concerted effort to review their teacher preparation programs in light of the PWD Act and the policy amendments. There is an urgent need to bridge the gap between teachers' existing and required skills to implement effective inclusive education programs. The existing pre-service programs should be revised, including more coursework and practicum related to the education of students with special needs, and the competencies including professional knowledge, assessment, collaboration and evaluation, and proficiency in the use of assistive technology and ICT need to be emphasized. A 'bottom up' strategy rather than a 'top down' process should be considered by the professional development program planners in India, for the determination of training program content and format, which may help reduce teacher isolation, and also make the program more meaningful and relevant for the participants (Das, et. al., 2013). Lately, the trend away from a narrow control of in-service education programs by

school administrators and/or university professors, and from the generic information pertinent to a group of teachers to training, is now more closely aligned to the expressed needs and preferences of teachers (Sharma and Deppeler, 2005). Research suggests that teachers have benefited from in-service programs that stem from a long term systemic staff development plan rather than from single shot short term programs (Das, et. al., 2013; David and Kuyini, 2012). Existing regular school teachers should therefore be provided adequate on-going opportunities for professional development.

Reforms, both at policy and institutional level, need to be considered, besides strengthening the capacity of institutions to efficiently deliver on policy commitments. A periodic monitoring of awareness, with special focus on the states and remote regions lagging behind, should be emphasized upon during impact assessment. States should be strongly encouraged to develop their own disability policies with a credible strategy for meeting their commitments under the PWD Act and the other Acts and legislations. The institutional framework at all levels should have a substantial direct role for persons with disabilities themselves. NGOs should have an active role both at policy and implementation level, with a strengthened financial accountability and monitoring of the program outcomes. There should be clear and strong enforcement mechanisms for the Acts and legislations, and the structural problems of coordination within the government, and between the public and non-governmental sectors, to be adequately addressed.

Conclusion

Inclusive education as an umbrella term serves in acknowledging that individual children differ in their abilities and needs and that each student should receive quality education irrespective of their abilities, disabilities, ethnicity, gender and age. Regardless of their strengths and weaknesses, all children need to be accommodated in a school as part of the same learning community. The perception of 'inclusion' among all the participants in the teaching and learning process plays an important role in supporting and promoting inclusion where the feeling and experiences of the children with special needs as well count as to what they feel about such an arrangement. It therefore is essential to constantly monitor and make necessary accommodations and arrangements for ensuring universal accessibility of infrastructure, pedagogy in classroom, teaching methods and techniques, to support learning and make education accessible to all. Successful inclusion of children with special needs is possible only when the regular schools are involved and committed to inclusion, parents are understanding and cooperative in considering what is essential, and the suitable methods and strategies are evolved at the national level for planning and implementing policies and procedures, in cooperation with local participants in the process, and also their practice through effective enforcement, to promote inclusion. Suitable assessment procedures, curriculum adaptations, improved, innovative, flexible and need-based teaching strategies, objective evaluation, creation of a barrier-free environment and accessible school facilities are the pre-requisites for effective inclusion. Only when the 'children with disabilities' substantially enjoy the facilities being enjoyed by their non-disabled peers, only then the schools may actually be considered inclusive; and education, an accessible inclusive education.

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