

TOGETHER WE LEARN BETTER: ENABLING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Anusuya K. Yadav


The inclusive classrooms create students who are comfortable with differences, skilled at confronting challenging issues, and aware of their interconnectedness. Schools are increasingly acknowledging the heterogeneity of their student populations and the need to respond thoughtfully and responsibly to differences in the classroom. It's understandable that educators often feel overwhelmed by growing demands for inclusion, multi cultural education, multiple intelligence, and differentiated instruction to deal with the growing diversity. School communities must be inclusive of all children, and openly recognize the unique contributions that children who have a disability make to community life. It is essential that inclusive education be supported to maintain and strengthen the personal relationships and social networks of children who have a disability. Each child's support must be individualized and flexible, while remaining relevant to its particular needs at the time. This paper appears to directly contradict the understanding of inclusive education as a concept, which is all about embracing diversity in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Disability, Inclusive Education, Special Education

INTRODUCTION

*"I live in a cocoon of social making
Peeping out at the world from behind a curtain."*

India has the second largest education system in the world, with 200 million children aged between 6 and 14 of whom around 25 million are out of school

Anusuya K. Yadav 
Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences,
Amity University, Noida
Email: akyadav@amity.edu

(World Bank, 2004). However, bearing in mind that apparently only 35% of children are registered at birth (UNICEF, 2004), it is estimated that around 35 to 80 million children are out-of-school (Singal, 2005a). Where do people with disabilities fit into this social system?

The genesis of special needs education in India can be traced back to pre-independent India. There are examples in Indian history that show that people with disabilities had educational opportunities, and that disability did not come in the way of learning. However, during the colonial period, India increasingly looked at educational models existing outside the country. Parents of children with disabilities, mainly from urban areas and with exposure to approaches prevalent in western countries, started schools for their children. Since the government had no policy on the education of children with disabilities, it extended grants to these private schools. This approach of setting up separate schools, mostly residential, spread across the country, although it was concentrated in urban areas. For over a century, these special schools offered the only education available to children with disabilities because of the widespread belief that children with special needs could not be educated alongside others. This allowed a small number of children to have access to education but did not help these children to enter the mainstream community after completing their education.

Some see the disabled as a fifth caste, below all others - impure and not so 'whole' (Coleridge, 1993) which may contribute to their societal invisibilisation in surveys and census. Although it may not be appropriate to judge the adoption of a northern concept in the south from a northern perspective, hasty use of such globalised terminology without engaging with the thinking behind it may present no more than empty rhetoric, whatever the context. Singal (2005a: 9) clearly perceives inclusive education as "...a concept that has been adopted from the international discourse, but has not been engaged within the Indian scenario." Despite the promotion of inclusive education, government documents focus on inclusive education as being about including children with disabilities in the education system, but not specifically the mainstream (Singal, 2005a).

Education as a human right has been recognized and affirmed in various national and international conferences including Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28), World Conference on Education for All (1990), the Salamanca Conference (1994) and World Education Forum (2000) where UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank, etc. and agencies and representatives from all over the world gathered to review and analyse their efforts towards the goal of "Education for All". Consequently, Inclusive education is regarded as the only

means to achieve the goal of "Education for All".

UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION

Inclusion is often confused with integration however these terms are not synonymous. Inclusion is a philosophy of belonging that is supported by a number of educational practices. Integration is a practice, a strategy that can be used as one means to facilitate inclusion. Integration is the process of having students participate in regular school programmes and interact with same age and grade peers when possible and appropriate. Integration does not mean that a student with special needs will always be placed full time in a regular classroom. Nor does it preclude the use of alternate instructional settings when it is appropriate. It is the participation with peers in the school and classroom community in meaningful ways that is the intent of integration, and this practice fosters the ultimate goal of belonging, of being included. Inclusion is a philosophy that promotes the acceptance of all students as members of a learning community, regardless of their circumstances. It supports the rights of students to be educated with their peers in a meaningful way, to the extent that they can manage.

It is the foundation for making the classroom or schools a welcoming place, where appropriate learning experiences are available for everyone. A successful inclusion experience must be tailored around the strengths and needs of individual students, not around a label or designation. It requires deliberate consideration of the systemic capacity to provide the services that will enable these students to be successful. It is the implementation of the 'policy and process' that allows all children to participate in all programmes. 'Policy' means that disabled children should be accepted without any restrictions in all the educational programmes meant for other children. It denotes equality, and accepts every child with his own unique capabilities. All the international, national and local programmes must accept this principle. The 'process' of inclusion denotes the ways in which the system makes itself welcoming to all. In terms of inclusion of disabled children, it means the shift in services from 'care of the disabled child' to his 'education and personal development'. Inclusive education goes one step further by defining these children as 'children with special needs' who need special attention, rather than children who are 'impaired' or 'handicapped'. Inclusive education is nothing but 'Making the programme for disabled children as an integral part of the general educational system rather than a system within general education'.

Inclusive education is achieved when the educational environment of children who have a disability cannot be distinguished from those of others in the school community. The three key components of inclusion are:

- **Physical Inclusion** - Simply being physically present – attending the local neighbourhood school, playing in the same playgrounds, being in the same classrooms and having access to specialist groupings such as art, computer, physical education, at and for the same time as other children. It goes without saying that if the child is not present, then clearly they cannot be included.
- **Social Inclusion** - Nurturing positive social inclusion is far more complex than the physical presence of a child in the classroom. One can be rejected and lonely even in a crowded classroom. The people who belong in a group are those who share the same experiences as all the other members and any reduction in the amount of shared time tends to place social inclusion at risk.
- **Curricular Inclusion** - Curricular inclusion requires the involvement of all children in the same daily learning events and as such careful thought and preparation are essential. It is increasingly being recognized that every child is special, with individual skills and needs, and this has to be addressed by the teacher. The child who has a disability highlights the relevance of this issue for all children.

INCLUSION WORKS: BELIEFS AND PRINCIPLES

The beliefs and principles on which inclusion works are given as under:

- All children can learn
- All children attend age appropriate regular classrooms in their local schools
- All children receive appropriate educational programs
- All children receive a curriculum relevant to their needs
- All children participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities
- All children benefit from cooperation, collaboration among home, among school, among community

Thus, Inclusion Means:

- Educating all children who have a disability in mainstream classrooms regardless of the nature of their disability.
- Providing all students enhanced opportunities to learn from each other's contributions.
- Providing necessary services within mainstream schools and preferably within regular classrooms.
- Supporting mainstream teachers and administrators (e.g., by providing time, training, teamwork, resources, and strategies).

- Having students who have a disability follow the same schedule as students who do not have a disability.
- Involving students who have a disability in age-appropriate academic classes and extracurricular activities, including art, music, physical education, excursions, assemblies, and graduation exercises.
- Students who have a disability using the school's canteen, library, playground, and other facilities along with students who do not have a disability.
- Encouraging friendships between students who do and do not have a disability.
- Students who have a disability receiving their education and job training in mainstream community environments when appropriate.
- Teaching all children to understand and accept human differences.

KEY FEATURES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Generally, inclusive education will be successful if these important features and practices are followed:

- Accepting unconditionally all children into regular classes and the life of the school.
- Providing as much support to children, teachers and classrooms as necessary to ensure that all children can participate in their schools and classes.
- Looking at all children at what they can do rather than what they cannot do.
- Teachers and parents have high expectations of all children.
- Developing education goals according to each child's abilities. This means that children do not need to have the same education goals in order to learn together in regular classes.
- Designing schools and classes in ways that help children learn and achieve to their fullest potential (for example, by developing class time tables for allowing more individual attention for all students).
- Having strong leadership for inclusion from school principals and other administrators.
- Having teachers who have knowledge about different ways of teaching so that children with various abilities and strengths can learn together.
- Having principals, teachers, parents and others work together to determine the most effective ways of providing a quality education in an inclusive environment.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

Recommendations to send children with disabilities to mainstream schools were first made in the Sargent Report in 1944, and again in 1964 by the Kothari Commission (Julka, 2005). Despite this, the change has been slow, with segregation in special schools dominating the scene until recently. The 1995 Persons with Disability Act (PDA) states that disabled children should be educated in integrated settings where possible, although it seems that the lack of implementation may be due to there being no enforcement agency for this legislation. Despite the promotion of inclusive education, govt. documents focus on inclusive education as being about including children with disabilities in the education system, but not specifically the mainstream (Singal, 2005a). However, inclusion in the education system is not the same as inclusion in the mainstream. It is however arguable that special education is in fact regarded as superior in India due to its preferred status (Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2002) and that it is inclusion in the mainstream that is currently seen as the resource – constrained inferior alternative.

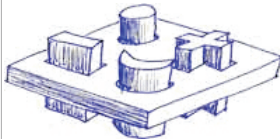
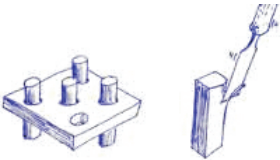
However, the limited coverage of mainly urban-based, impairment specific special schools in India may result in the exclusion of children with disabilities who do not fit the categories of their institutions or who live in rural areas. Inclusive education may be the only way of facilitating educational access for these children. A focus on physical access to school, rather than access to curriculum and equal treatment once in the classroom (Thomas, 2005) is an additional barrier to inclusion, possibly resulting in dropout. Singal (2005a) too argues that government policy focus on resources and physical access (e.g. distribution of aids and appliances), or infrastructure such as ramps in schools, and the notion of social justice through equal distribution of benefit, seems to be more about inputs, not processes like pedagogy, curriculum or attitudes. It is this focus which results in selection of the relatively few- “Easy to accommodate children” with mild or moderate disabilities that do not need too much specialist assistance.

This apparently selective inclusion, with children being 'prepared' in order to be 'ready' for the mainstream (NIEPA, 2003) seems to give inclusive education an exclusive flavour, although this may be because homogeneity in the classroom can be perceived as an essential prerequisite to enable good teaching (Singal, 2005). Despite islands of govt. programme success, disability budgets remain under used (Thomas, 2005), and reserved jobs unfilled (Bhan, 2006; Thomas, 2005). These are sure signs of sporadic implementation of inclusive education, as is the persistently low percentage of children with disabilities being in school.

The brief explanation given in Table 1 below shows the concept of inclusion, based on the knowledge of the inclusive framework and debates that are happening around the world.

Table 1

The Concept of Inclusion Based on the Knowledge of the Inclusive Framework.

Inclusive education is ...	Inclusive education is not ...
...A constantly evolving process of change and improvement within schools and the wider education system to make education more welcoming, learner-friendly, and beneficial for a wide range of people	...A one-off project that can be delivered and completed within a short timeframe
...About restructuring education cultures, policies and practices so that they can respond to a diverse range of learners - male and female; disabled and non-disabled; from different ethnic, language, religious or financial backgrounds; of different ages; and facing different health, migration, refugee or other vulnerability challenges	... Focused just on developing education for disabled learners within mainstream settings
...About changing the education system so that it is flexible enough to accommodate any learner 	...About trying to change the learner so that he/she can fit more conveniently into an unchanged education system 
...An on going effort to identify and remove barriers that exclude learners within each unique situation	...Based on following a set formula of actions that can be used in any situation
...About identifying and removing barriers to learners' presence in (access to) education, participation in the learning process, and academic and social achievement	...Focused just on helping learners to gain access to schools or classrooms
...Focused on solving attitude, practice, policy, environmental and resource barriers	...Just about overcoming financial and environmental challenges
...A process in which all stakeholders should participate (teachers, learners, parents, community members, government policy-makers, local leaders, NGOs, etc.)	...A project that can be implemented solely by external experts or education officials
...Something that can happen outside the formal education system , as well as in formal school environments (inclusive education can happen in learning spaces that are non-formal, alternative, community-based, etc. with learners from young children through to elderly adults)	...Just a process that happens in formal schools

SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The Seven Principles can be applied to any classroom or lesson plan to increase equity and decrease exclusion.

1. Teaching All Students

Educators should take several different approaches to teaching the same material so that information becomes more interesting and tangible to a greater number of students.

2. Exploring Multiple Identities

Students who are proud of themselves and excited by the world around them will be more compassionate and understanding people; the same is true for educators.

3. Preventing Prejudice

Educators should take a proactive approach to debunking preconceived stereotypes and preventing them from escalating into prejudices and negative biases.

4. Promoting Social Justice

Students are good judges of what is fair, especially when they are affirmatively challenged to consider issues of social justice. Educators should talk to them about issues of social justice and injustice in terms of fair versus unfair, respectful versus disrespectful.

5. Choosing Appropriate Materials

Inclusive classrooms use books and materials that reflect accurate images of diverse peoples and challenge stereotypes.

6. Teaching and Learning About Cultures and Religions

Educators should create curiosity and expand students' horizons by teaching about others in a positive manner. Students should have the opportunity to learn from their peers as well as other cultures.

7. Adapting and Integrating Lessons Appropriately

Educators should be flexible when using and adapting lessons in our curricula, as well as in prescribed curricula in general. Many of the most teachable moments are unplanned and unscripted.

APPROACHES TO IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

As Skrtic et al. (1996) pointed out, inclusive education goes far beyond the physical placement of children with disabilities in general classrooms. Rather, as many writers have emphasised, it requires nothing less than transforming regular education by promoting school/classroom cultures, structures and practices that accommodate to diversity (Christensen, 1996; Department of

Education, 2001; Dyson et al., 2003; Shaffner & Buswell, 1996). In implementing inclusive education, attention should be paid to three levels: the broad society and education system, the school and the classroom.

Societal and Education System Level

At this level, factors such as the following have been identified as playing important roles: (a) the policy context of the wider community (Dyson, et al. 2003), (b) collaboration between government agencies and between them and nongovernment organisations, and (c) collaboration among educators, parents, peers, other school personnel, and community agency personnel.

To bring about inclusion, according to Oliver (1996), changes must take place at all levels of society. These include differences becoming positively valued, education systems becoming morally committed to the integration of all children into a single education system, schools becoming welcoming environments, teachers becoming committed to working with all children, curricula becoming freed of 'disablist' content.

School Level

At this level, the key question is what evidence is there that mainstream schools can act in ways that enable them to respond to student diversity to facilitate participation by all students in the cultures, curricula and communities of those schools? After extensively reviewing the literature on this topic, Dyson et al. (2003) were able to find only six studies that provided trustworthy evidence relevant to this question. In determining the extent to which schools facilitate (or inhibit) inclusion, two school-level themes ran through these studies: the importance of school culture (e.g., the values and attitudes held by staff) and leadership and decision-making. School leadership was also emphasised by Ainscow (1995), Schaffner and Buswell (1996) and Stanovich and Jordan (1998). The latter found that the strongest predictor of effective teaching behaviour in inclusive education settings in Canada was the subjective school norm as operationalized by principals' attitudes towards heterogeneous classrooms. Developing school support networks has also been identified as an important facilitator of inclusive education (Ainscow, 1995; Shaffner & Buswell, 1996), as has encouraging a strong sense of community with professionals and paraprofessionals working collaboratively with parents (Skrtic et al., 1996).

Classroom Level

Of course, the success or otherwise of inclusive education critically depends on what takes place minute-by-minute in regular classrooms. Inclusive education does not mean the coexistence of one programme for a student with special educational needs and another for the other students. Rather, it implies changing the programme and teaching approaches for all students in a class. In this sense, since it involves not only accommodating regular classroom

programmes and teaching strategies to the needs of SWSN, but also making adjustments to meet the diverse needs of other students in the class. In general terms, this means teachers adopting student-centred pedagogy, as distinct from curriculum-centred pedagogy (McDonnell, 1998; UNESCO, 1994).

Inclusive education also requires close collaboration between regular class teachers and a range of other people, including specialist teachers, teaching assistants, therapists, and parents. Features of consultation models that have been advocated include (a) the regular classroom teacher having primary responsibility for students' overall programmes, (b) equal professional status of the regular teacher and the specialist teacher, (c) the involvement of parents in decision-making and planning (Antia et al., 2002), (d) teaching assistants working in partnership with teachers to provide supplementary, but not the sole, input to SWSN, and (e) most additional support being provided by stakeholders, rather than through withdrawal (Davis & Hopwood, 2002).

THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

- Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement.
- Inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued.
- Inclusive education brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students.
- Inclusion is an effort to make sure that diverse learners – those with disabilities, different languages and cultures, different homes and family lives, different interests and ways of learning – are exposed to teaching strategies that reach them as individual learners.
- Inclusive schools ask teachers to provide appropriate individualized supports and services to all students without the stigmatization that comes with separation.
- Teachers in inclusive classrooms vary their styles to enhance learning for all students.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to remember that Inclusive education is at a very early stage of conceptualization and implementation in India. The fact that it is being discussed, debated and in some places implemented although falteringly, demonstrates a willingness to engage with elements of a new concept that has the potential to be developed in the future in a positive

manner. In his influential work on educational change, Fullan (1993) highlights the complexity of the change process from a phenomenological perspective - stakeholder-driven and influenced, not straightforward, and a long-term journey or process of conflict, rather than a blueprint. Seen in this long-term, slightly chaotic, light, the sporadic implementation of inclusive education may be one step on this lengthy journey during which stakeholders learn from mistakes and adapt their plans and practices accordingly. The teacher education focus of some government programmes is perhaps going in the right direction. However, the apparently slight regard for content and methodology of the courses, which do not re-conceptualize Inclusive Education or address attitudes towards disability, demonstrates the need for further change in this context. Also, teachers are not the only stakeholders involved. Students, parents, administrators and local government officials are affected too, all of who will see any innovation or new concept in a different light. However, the re-conceptualization of inclusive education as a whole school issue appears to be essential if inclusive education is to be more than physical relocation of children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. The paper concludes that a twin-track approach to disability may assist not only in improving educational access for marginalized children, but also the re-conceptualization of inclusive education as a school quality issue to benefit all children. This could contribute in the long-term towards the achievement of Education For All and fulfilment of the Fundamental Right to Education enshrined in the Constitution of India in 2002.

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