

CONCEPT AND PRACTICES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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The philosophy of inclusion is not new to India. It was very much there in the ancient times when all children were sent to 'gurukuls' for education. In today's context also, the emphasis is on providing education to all children in an inclusive environment. Inclusive education means education of all children, with and without disabilities together in regular schools. It is an approach, which takes into account unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs of all children. It is an attempt to meet the unique needs of every child in a regular school setting where all children, including those with disability, try to participate in all facets of school life. The goal is to provide accommodating and personalized education for all students within the context of a general educational classroom. The need of the hour is to develop a universal design of learning which makes learning joyful for all children.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, Personalized Education, Learning Needs

INTRODUCTION

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 states that every child from the age of six to fourteen shall have a right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school till the completion of elementary education. The 'Zero Rejection' policy adopted by the 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' would ensure that no child is left out of the education system. The thrust is to provide integrated and inclusive education to children with

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special needs in general schools.

Wikipedia defines 'Inclusion' as an approach to educating students with special educational needs. Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students.

Inclusive education 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 settings with an appropriate network of support services. It aims at all stakeholders in the system such as learners, parents, community, teachers, administrators and policy makers to be comfortable with diversity and see it as a challenge rather than a problem. Inclusive education means the education of all children, with and without disabilities together in regular schools. It is an approach, which takes into account unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs of all children. All schools have to be inclusive in their approach, so that the children with disabilities have access to these schools that accommodate within them a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting the needs of all children. Inclusion in education means that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community. They are included in the feeling of belonging among other students, teachers, and support staff.

Puri and Abraham (2005) say that the concept of inclusion is based on the premise that all children and adults are a part of society and that the community helps the development of resources where all children are equally valued and have the same opportunities for participation. Then they go on to say that it is an on going process and not a fixed state.

Mani (2000) states that one of the main features of inclusive education is development of capacity of the general education system to meet the educational services for children with disabilities. He says that inclusive education enhances the communication between children with disabilities and non-disabled children. He points out that inclusive education does not only enable the possibility of enrolling more children with disabilities since one resource teacher can be made responsible for 20-30 students with disabilities rather than have one teacher manage just eight children as recommended for special education. He recommends orientation and short-term training programmes for general teachers to overcome their inhibitions about children with disabilities in general schools. He elaborates on the theme with his thoughts on how to conduct the preparation of inclusion at the school level, preparation for inclusion at the teacher education front and other support

services that are imperative for effective inclusion.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and its zero rejection policy stresses that children will be educated in an environment which is best suited to his or her learning needs and promoting access to schools, improving the quality of education services and strengthening education institutions.

Lipsky and Gartner (1997) feel that inclusive education is not a reform of special education. It is the convergence of the need to restructure the public education system to meet the needs of a changing society. They go on to saying that it is a system by which both typical students as well as students with special needs accrue benefits. The premise of their thoughts states that inclusive education is not merely a characteristic of a democratic society, it is essential to it. It is an attempt to meet the unique needs of every child in a regular school setting. All children, in spite of their disability, try to participate in all facets of school life. So some changes might be made in the mainstream schools to make them more accommodating to all students individual needs. The goal is to provide accommodating and personalized education for all students within the context of a general educational classroom.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

In tracing the evolution of education in India one must begin with the system of general education and its beginnings of what today we loosely term "education" as it was understood and practiced in ancient India. The earliest recorded system of education per se is found in the Rig Veda, which broadly deals with the philosophy of life and the practices in learning (generally speaking, the word Veda means "to know"). It is called the Vedic Era in the history of education in India and is thought to be almost 5000 years old. During this period education revolved around the system of Gurukuls. These Gurukuls or Rishikulas were the seats of learning and students were required to live with their "guru" or teacher and learn by precept as much as by actual study and debates. In this ancient system of education (the guru-shishya parampara) all children were taught together, be it under a shady tree or in the Gurukul (school), whether normal, gifted or physically or intellectually disabled and were seen as worthy of the benefits of education, each according to her or his abilities. It was inclusive education in the truest sense. There were no special schools catering exclusively to specific disabilities or learning difficulties. Students found incapable of academic learning were given options to learn other occupations, which they could do easily, such as tending cattle, gardening or housework. This was rightly seen as an opportunity to be usefully

employed and was not thought derogatory but prevented the hierarchy of the educated and the uneducated. It is argued that providing for persons with disability was based on the theory of Karma and a way towards a better life in the next birth. Whatever the motivation the fact remains that even as far back as 187 BC mention has been made of mental retardation (Garba Upanishad), Patanjali included disabled persons for yoga therapy, and in the 4th and 5th Century BC during the Maurya Dynasty, Kautilya passed an edict banning both verbal and behavioural abuse of persons with disabilities recognizing their right to property and employment. Later King Ashoka established hospitals and asylums.

A significant milestone was around the 1st Century BC according to a legend which tells us the story of a king who was told that his three sons were “dull witted”. The crucial question now was “Who would look after his kingdom after the king was no more?” So, he began a nation wide hunt for someone who would be able to tutor his dull witted sons. The search ended, we are told, with Visnusarman a courtier who assured the king that he would devise special ways of teaching the royal pupils. The legend goes on to tell us of how Visnusarman developed his strategy for education using a collection of animal fables, which taught the princes matters related to diplomacy and values honoured universally. This resulted in “The Panchatantra”, the ancient Indian collection of animal fables from around 1000 BC, and is perhaps the first book on special education.

In India we have a rich cultural legacy for inclusive education and India has always been and is still today an inclusive society in the sense that a very wide variety of cultural and religious beliefs exist side by side. Even today, small rural schools provide education for all children under one roof, little realizing that they are following a system of education newly rediscovered in the West termed “Inclusive Education”. The tragic fact seems to be that somewhere on our way towards modernization we have lost this unique system of education.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES

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, change has been slow, with segregation in special schools dominating the scene until recently. Several education acts and promises have been passed by central government in India in the past twenty years, although they do not seem to tackle the roots of attitudinal barriers to inclusion. For example, in 1993 the Delhi Declaration on Education for All promised to “...ensure a place for every child in a school or appropriate education programme according to his or her capabilities” (cited in

Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2002: 96). This issue of 'capabilities' is key to the varied interpretations of 'inclusivity' of children, the focus on the child's abilities diverting attention away from inadequate teaching methods (Singal, 2005b). This is perhaps true for some teachers, but the continued development of government and NGO teacher training programmes would also appear to show awareness of the need for pedagogical change. The Persons with Disability Act 1995 states that disabled children should be educated in integrated settings where possible. The right to education Act has put the onus on the government to provide quality education to all the children up to 14 years of age. Now the efforts are being taken to practice inclusion. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan has steered the inclusive education scenario in India.

PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In inclusive education each child should have the opportunity to experience meaningful challenges, exercise choice and responsibility, interact collaboratively with others, and be actively engaged in developmental, academic, non-academic, inter and intra personal activities as part of the educational process. Implementation of the plans, programmes and actions depend upon continuous community support, broad planning, training and evaluation. An adapted school environment is needed to suit the need of every child with disabilities. The important principles of inclusion are:

- Sharing of responsibilities of functionaries working at different levels;
- Providing additional support to children;
- Development of a collaborative framework to meet the additional needs and interests of children;
- Implications for various types of disabilities;
- Knowledge about family and social environment of children;
- Modifications in Teaching-Learning strategies/modalities;
- Improving professional competencies of teachers;
- Ensuring community support and support of other functionaries working at different levels

The process of inclusion starts with the planning of education for all children under regular education in the classrooms, which is least restrictive. Children with disabilities need improvement in cognitive and social development and physical motor skills. All functionaries associated with school should share responsibilities and support all children. Collaborative efforts from school staff to meet the unique needs of all children are essential.

Rights and needs of all children need to be considered in determining how and when to include children with disabilities in the school programmes. So far as the provision of Individualized Education Programme is concerned, it is based on intensity of service required. Family and social circumstances of children are crucial to inclusion of children with disabilities.

MODELS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

In inclusive education the general education itself makes the education of children with disabilities as its integral part. This implies that the teacher should be equipped with skills to address the educational needs of children with disabilities to a minimum extent. This calls for strengthening the pre service teacher preparation programme with adequate component of inclusion of children with disabilities. Inclusive education creates effective classroom where the educational needs of all children are addressed irrespective of their ability. Total inclusion occurs when general classroom teachers take most of the responsibilities of the classroom. If a specialist takes care of the children with disabilities in a general classroom it is not total inclusion.

There is no clear consensus in the field about the models to be practiced in the educational institutions. Some educational thinkers and researchers are for the full inclusion model (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994). A few others are in favour of partial inclusion (Hallahan and Kauffman 1991). Let us discuss these two models in detail.

1. MODEL OF FULL INCLUSION

The strong movement towards inclusive education demands full time inclusion of children in regular education system. This model calls for providing support to every type and degree of disability in the regular classroom. Needless to say co-curricular activities also must be adapted to cater to the needs of all the children admitted in the school. Proper assessment and planning has to be made for every activity to be enjoyed by a child who may require special adaptation. The following adaptations in the classroom functioning facilitate full inclusion.

A. Co-operative Learning

This is an effective way of including children with disabilities in a regular classroom. Here children in heterogeneous small groups work together towards a specific goal. Before making the groups, peers are deliberately trained to help in developing a particular academic skill in children with disabilities.

B. Instructional Adaptations and Accommodations

Instruction may be modified for children with disabilities. Modifications usually take the form of modified assignments or modified instructional strategies. Children with disability feel comfortable in the group as the modification is made to suit them.

C. Training General Education Teachers

General education teachers are content experts. But they are not well versed with the special needs of children with disabilities. Special education teachers usually lack expertise in teaching an individual subject. Keeping this in mind the general education teachers are given additional training in the area of specific disabilities and the special instructional needs.

D. Practical Difficulties of Full Inclusion

- **Labelling:** There is a possibility that some children with disabilities feel inferior due to their deviant condition. This may lead to poor self-esteem in the child and hinder the child from taking part in other activities of the school.
- **Special Instructional Needs:** Few children with disabilities depending on the type and severity of their disability call for special material and method in the instructional setting. It may be difficult to provide those in a regular school and hence full inclusion may not serve all children.
- **Stigma of Groupism:** Children with disabilities may be viewed as a group and this will divert the attention from the individual. They may be treated as yet another minority group, adding to the already existing groups in the society.
- **Attitude of General Educators:** Most teachers in the general stream feel that they are not capable of handling children with disabilities. Teachers already have a tedious job of catering to a huge number. Due to this over burdening situation, they are unwilling to do extra work. It results in negative attitude of teachers and heads of institutes they feel that taking children with disabilities in the school will be an additional liability on them.

E. Conditions for Full Inclusion

It is clear now that full inclusion calls for total preparedness on the part of

the school authorities. This model requires the classroom environment to be fully conducive for learning for all the children. The physical environment should be modified to suit the needs of children. For example in case of a child having hearing impairment there are certain prerequisites to be kept in mind while admitting the child to a regular education stream. Some of the crucial points regarding hearing impairment are given below.

- Early intervention is essential that hearing impairment is identified and intervened before 6 months of age.
- Suitable hearing device has to be used after proper diagnosis and medical intervention, if necessary
- Listening training has to begin immediately to make up for the delay in auditory input. Development of age appropriate language and social skills.
- In case the child is not comfortable with lip reading the option of sign language should be considered and efforts needs to be taken for using sign language in the school for teaching the child.

2. MODELS OF PARTIAL INCLUSION

These models came as a viable option to full inclusion. Some educators are in favour of these models as this is more practical. Unlike in integration, here the system of education and the teachers adjust or prepare to take care of the needs of the child with disability. The child is in the classroom throughout as per the ideology of inclusion. The partial inclusion models suggested by Hallahan, Kauffman and Pullen (2009) are given below.

A. Collaborative Consultation

In this approach a special educator and a general educator collaborate to identify teaching strategists for a student with disability. Regular meetings are scheduled between the two. The relationship between the two professionals is based on the premise of shared responsibility and equal authority. Special educator will see the child in a resource room or other setting. A change to the instruction is suggested to the regular classroom teacher, which is practiced in the classroom along with the regular plan of the teacher. Special educator helps the student to practice newly acquired skill and re teach difficult skills. This model is suitable for an area where there is low incidence of students with special needs. If a school has got lesser number of students with special needs, this is a very useful model. In collaborative consultation a specialist will provide support to the general education teacher.

B. Teaming Model

A team is assigned for each grade level. A period per week will be assigned to the team for planning. Team members meet with the special educators on a regular basis. In the meetings, the special educator provides information like the possible instructional strategies, modifications, and ideas for assignment of students depending on the requirement of each team. This model is suitable when student to teacher ratio is high. But the special educator gets limited opportunities to work in general education classrooms for the children with disabilities.

C. Cooperative Teaching

A special educator and a general educator will teach the diverse group of students in the same classroom. Both educators are responsible for instructional planning and delivery, student achievements, assessment and discipline. Commonly it looks like one teacher is teaching and the other teacher assisting. In reality both of them would have worked together before the class, keeping in mind the requirement of the children who need special attention to learn the particular concept. Students receive age appropriate academic support service and possible modified instructions. There are minimum scheduling problems as general educators and special educators work together. This fosters continuous and on going communication between educators. This model is appropriate when the student to teacher ratio is small and this takes care of more number of children with disability included in a class.

CHALLENGES FOR INCLUSION

Adequate academic as well as administrative support is the key for the success of inclusion of children with disabilities in general schools. Simply enrolment of these children will not serve the purpose of inclusion. Respecting need of each child is a real challenge for the teachers and administrators. The basic challenges confronted by the stakeholders associated with inclusive education are:

1. School reforms.
2. Attitude of teachers, parents and community.
3. Curricular adaptations for effective classroom processes.
4. Capacity building of teachers and other functionaries
5. Adapting need based instructional strategies
6. Provision of adequate human resources and material resources
7. Facilitating collaborative learning.

8. Developing partnership with professionals and organizations.

CONCLUSION

In the model of inclusive education, it is not the Child, but the education system, which is seen as a problem. Therefore, it is the system (with all its components) which should be changed, modified & made flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, including children with disabilities. The onus for success is therefore on the flexibility of the system. It focuses on the environment, as the “disabling” cause because it fails to provide appropriate access to equal opportunities for all persons to participate fully in social life.

It is essential to build an inclusive society through an inclusive approach. Success of inclusion demands effective collaboration and meaningful cooperation from all stakeholders associated with education of children. It would be pragmatic to chalk out the ways and means to make schools more accessible for children with disabilities. We need to develop an inclusive design of learning to make the education joyful for all children so that the education for them is welcoming, learner friendly and beneficial and they feel as a part of it not apart from it.

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