

Inclusive curriculum development: opportunities and challenges in open & distance education

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Persons with disabilities are regarded as one of the most socially excluded groups in all societies today. Many policies and Programmes have been formulated for their advantage and more so, in the field of education, disability studies been introduced. Though disability studies in education has recently been formally recognized, but it started when the educators have resisted and spoken against the hegemony of special education, institutionalization, sheltered workshops, and social exclusion. Disability studies in education also depend on the social theories which influence disability to a large extent. Now, scholars in the humanities also have been influential. Today, educators around the globe are coming up with new ways of thinking about disability and educational research, policy, and practice. Yet, a little has been done in this regard.

The phenomenon of disability is an integral part of the human experience. It cannot be divorced from the social setting where it is produced. It cannot exist outside the periphery of social structure. Therefore, disability has been conceptualized by different scholars as the part and parcel of social practice and social life. By doing so, the scholars have categorized disability at the societal level. Thus, disability is an outcome of some principles which make it a social phenomenon. This is why, it is widely accepted that disability is socially constructed and culturally exasperated (G. N. Karna, 2001, P. 25). In this sense, the proponents of social model of disability argue that the physical, mental or sensory disability is not just an attribute of an individual but a complex accumulation of conditions, activities and relationships. Most of these are, in fact, the bi-product of social environment. Hence, the scholars have overwhelmingly viewed the problem of disability from human right or social-political approach (Lang, 1998, PP. 4-8.).

In this regard with a broad viewpoint, Amartya Sen in his work “Development as Freedom”, argued that, the development or wellbeing has to be majored in terms of facilities and services that are available for the fulfillment of the basic needs of human beings in terms of food, shelter, clothing, education and health and also freedom from poverty, disease, illiteracy, ignorance, unemployment and malnutrition. Development has to be understood as freedom from all kinds of exploitation and awareness about one’s social and economic position. Undoubtedly, the most important issue of the education of disabled people over the last twenty years has been that of integration and this has overshadowed both the rhetoric and reality of debates about education and citizenship as far as disabled people are concerned. Despite the humanitarian intentions underpinning the development of this segregated system of special education, by the 1960s it was becoming obvious that it was failing the vast majority of disabled people, both in educational terms and in terms of personal and social development.

LITERATE AND ILLITERATE DISABLED POPULATION

Disabled Population	Literate	Illiterate
Visual	5,30,1316	5,33,3565
Speech	5,94,431	1,046,437
Hearing	5,44,748	7,16,974
Locomotor	3,502,924	2,602,553
Mental	8,57,813	1,406,008

(Source: Census report 2001)

As per Census 2001, the literacy level of the disabled population is only 49 per cent. Literacy rates for the disabled female population are around 37 per cent as compared to the national average of over 54 per cent for the female population.

Literacy rates for the disabled male population are 58.14 per cent as compared to 75.85 per cent for males.

Some Legislative Measures

As per the constitution of India, education has emerged as one of the fundamental right. In the country, earlier there was the concept of special education for the disability sector. However in the mid 1970s the integrated system of education came into existence. Besides this, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with the help of state administration, are imparting the traditional vocational education to the disabled. Now, because of the trouble-free utility and user-friendliness of the disabled to technology, the focus is being given on distance mode to educate these sections of people by providing them all sort of accessibility. The government has formulated a few policies and legislations regarding the education of people with disabilities. Here, in this paper an attempt has been made to discuss some of the policies and programmes along with their objectives and the barriers which the students with various disabilities face in getting equal educational opportunities. Some of the important policies and programmes are:

- The Integrated Education for Disabled Children Scheme, launched in 1974, to admit children with disabilities in regular schools;
- The District Primary Education Programme, 1985, which acknowledges the fact that universalisation of education is possible only if it includes children with disabilities;
- The National Policy on Education, 1986, which promotes the integration of children with mild disabilities into the mainstream;
- The Project Integrated Education for the Disabled, launched in 1987, which encourages all schools in a neighborhood to enroll children with disabilities;
- The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, which recommends making changes in assessment and curriculum, and removing

architectural barriers, to support inclusion. It also recommends providing free books and uniform for children with disabilities;

- The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Retardation and Multiple Disability, Act 1999, which recommends promotion of inclusive education;
- The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2000), which pledges that the "SSA will ensure that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided education in an appropriate environment";
- The Amendment to the Constitution in 2001, to make education a fundamental right for those in the 6-14 age group, which covers children with disabilities;
- The draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, which has a section on education, states that, "There is a need for mainstreaming of the persons with disabilities in the general education system through inclusive education." It also mentions that children "learn best in the company of their peers";
- A Comprehensive Plan of Action for Children and Youth with Disabilities, presented by the minister for Human Resource Development, Arjun Singh, in March 2005. This Action Plan advocates inclusive education, and envisages making all schools "disabled-friendly" by 2020.
- The RCI is also working with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to develop audio and video materials for "sensitization of parents and grassroots functionaries and making them aware of the productive capacity of children with disabilities".

Barriers and Gaps

Despite all these attempts of the government to develop the overall condition of the disabled persons in general and that of the educational level in particular, their educational level is not satisfactory. A study from National Centre for the

Promotion of Employment of Disabled Persons (NCPEDP, research report, 2004) shows that only 0.1% (1635) of Disabled have been enrolled in higher educational institutions. In many parts of the world including India, this is still the case where institutions of higher education claim to provide equal access and reasonable accommodations because of which disabled students still face discriminatory policies and practices. In addition, too little is available about inclusive pedagogy and policy in higher education.

Too few analyses and critiques of policy can be found in the disability studies in education literature and the little there is, focuses primarily on inclusive education policy. Yet, there are a number of other policy problems to be encountered, for example, Curriculum Policy, Teacher Education Policy, and Standardized Testing Policies (M.N.G Mani, 1994, P.11.). Likewise, there are few educational policy proposals that emanate from a disability studies perspective. Furthermore, we have yet to consider ways in which disability studies in education could contribute to the broader educational policy field in terms of policy analysis methods and policy making processes. An Act/policy is not an end in itself but only a means to address some of the problems mentioned above. So, it requires political will and effective implementation of these policies from the government as well as the private institutions working for the disabled population.

Inclusive Curriculum Development and Course Designing

Inclusive education can be defined as ‘the disabled and non-disabled young people learning together in colleges and universities, with appropriate networks of support’ (Bradley & Healey, 2004). Here, inclusion means enabling students to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities in accordance to their needs. At the same time, accessible Curricula refers to the designing of programmes/courses and educational materials barrier-free (fully accessible for all) without affecting the content and standard. If course content is well designed, disabled students will be able to gain access to it. It will enable them to receive the same learning experience as their classmates get. A consequence of this approach is that if the course materials are made accessible for

students with disabilities, it increases their usability. Inclusion in education involves:

- Valuing all students and staff equally by increasing the participation of students, reducing their exclusion from learning activities and by Restructuring the cultures policies and practices.
- Planning the teaching and learning strategies which make the delivery of the programme as inclusive as is reasonably possible.
- Viewing the difference between students as resources to support learning, rather than as problems to be overcome.
- Developing a more student-centered approach to course/programmes, encouraging dialogue and collaboration amongst the students.
- Facilities to get student's feedback and incorporating them in further course
- Improving facilities for staff as well as for students.
- Inclusion of disability issues not only in the disability related trainings but also in all other training programs.
- Emphasizing the role of institutions in building community and developing values, as well as in increasing academic achievements.
- Fostering mutually sustaining relationships between institutions and communities.
- Recognizing that inclusion in education as one aspect of inclusion in society.

Formulation of Inclusive Committees

Designing courses/ programmes is not an easy task. We should take care of different needs of many heterogeneous students including disabled. From the very beginning, the requirements of the learners for completing the programme should be addressed in all respects. In case of the disabled it is more challenging. The people having experience in working with disabled, people having good knowledge and information about such students and disabled members of the concerned

institutions should be included in all committees like, the Academic Boards, Faculty Boards, Teaching & Learning Policy Committees, Approval and Validation Offices, Approval Panels, Undergraduate and Post-graduate Programme Committees, Programme Teams, Subject Assessment Panels, Award Assessment Boards, Partnership Management Committees, Monitoring Committees, Quality and Standards Committees and in Information and Learning Services. The views of the members of different committees should be taken seriously and necessary modifications/changes as per requirement should be made. The institutions should prepare some check lists so that courses/programmes before being launched can be cross checked.

Assurance of Accessibility

The programmes and courses offered to the students with different educational needs should ensure accessibility from all angles. There are a lot of barriers which the disabled students face during their studies. Some of them have mobility problems and some others face problems in accessing the study materials. Often the methods followed for their assessment are not suitable. Hence by making an inclusive and accessible curriculum these issues should be addressed. The delivery of programmes should take into account the needs of disabled people and appropriate methods should be adapted to accommodate their individual requirements. The institutions should ensure reduction of barriers for learning and participation for all students, not only for those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs (V. Fletcher, 2002.). We should acknowledge the rights of such students for education in their neighborhood.

Educational institutions are expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' in order to allow students access to do their courses. Reasonable adjustments in this context are open to certain amount of interpretations, but are influenced by various considerations. There are a number of factors, which the education providers will have to consider when assessing whether an adjustment or additional equipment or service is 'reasonable':

- whether the adjustment would affect the maintenance of academic and other standards
- the cost of the adjustment and the financial resources available
- whether making the adjustment or additional provision is practical
- the effectiveness of the adjustment or additional provision
- the disruption caused to others
- whether the student, or others, should provide the additional provision or services, and
- The importance of the service to which access is being sought.

Universal Design principles can be applied to make the courses/programmes more accessible for people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, language skills and learning styles (D. Rose, S. Sethuraman, & G. Meo, 2000, PP.56-60.). Some of the features are discussed below:

1. Inclusiveness creates a classroom environment that respects and values diversity. The institutions should invite students to meet and discuss disability-related accommodations and other special learning needs. Segregating or stigmatizing any student should be avoided. The privacy of all students should be taken care off.
2. Physical access assures the accessibility of classrooms, laboratory classes and field work to individuals with a wide range of physical abilities and disabilities. The safety of all students should be assured.
3. Delivery methods use multiple modes to deliver content. Alternate delivery methods, including lecture, discussion, hands-on activities, Internet-based interaction and fieldwork each needs to be made accessible to students with a wide range of abilities, disabilities, interests, and previous experiences.
4. Web pages provide printed materials in electronic formats. Printed and web-based materials in simple, intuitive, and consistent formats should be prepared. Text descriptions of graphics presented on Web pages and Arranging content in order of importance should be entertained.

5. Interaction encourages different ways for students to interact with each other and with the institution. These methods may include in-class questions and discussion, group work, and Internet-based communications.

6. Feedback provides effective input for further accessibility.

7. Multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge For example, besides traditional tests and papers, group work, demonstrations, portfolios, and presentations as options for demonstrating knowledge should be provided.

Availability of Programme and Course specifications

Programme specifications and descriptions give sufficient information to students with disabilities and others to complete the courses/programmes successfully. Availability of Program and Course related specifications, descriptions and other facilities for the disabled learners through manuals or student's handbooks should be assured. The programme specifications and descriptions should provide assistance in every respect so that the students are able to perform their tasks successfully. Before admission in any courses students should be made aware of assignments and activities, such as fieldwork and work-based learning. This will aid in reducing the impediments caused due to various impairments. The early provision of information will also enable students to choose a course more suited to their situation if the difficulties cannot be overcome. Some of the issues which need to be addressed in programme specifications are as follows:

- The core required elements of the programme that all students have to achieve.
- Availability of reasonable adjustments to support students with particular impairments to meet their individual needs and how they can proceed through the programme.
- Problems/issues occur, the main mechanisms available for dealing with any concerns by students or staff.
- Providing handouts in advance and in different formats (Braille, audio and electronic).

Support Mechanisms during Assessment

Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students, the same opportunities as their peers in order to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. Institutions should consider implementing procedures for supporting alternative assessment and examination arrangements when and wherever necessary. Assessment is a key shaper of the students' experience of a course, and it is central to the guidance of the students' on effective course design and our concern for academic standards. Many of the key issues confront us in developing an inclusive curriculum. For disabled students, it is essential that they are assessed in such a way as not to disadvantage them, and equally not give them an advantage over other students (Ryan, J. (1997), p88). It is advisable to examine issues of disability at the design stage of a course (or re-design) and not just when it gets to issues of assessment. The institutions should ensure the following aspects when offering a course to the disabled students:

- widely publicized and easy for students to follow
- operate with minimum delay
- allow flexibility in the conduct of the assessment
- protect the rigor ness and comparability of the assessment
- applied consistently across the institution
- not dependent on students' individual funding arrangements.

Use of Assistive Technology in Instructional Design

With the help of assistive technology we can make education more open and accessible for the people with special needs. Assistive technology helps in enhancing the lives of people with certain limitations in all aspects, but its use in the field of education is more desirable. We can apply these technologies as the major support service providers in all teaching learning process. These can be used in all aspects of education, according to the institutional or individual requirements. For example, the institutions can apply the universal design principles along with the help of special technologies in all instructional activities, from preparing the

study materials till the assessment of the learners. Similarly the students can take assistance, from taking admission in a course till appearing the exams at the end.

As educators, we must be careful in the selection of appropriate tools and should encourage using such products and methods that allow the students for doing their work efficiently. While designing the curriculum, we should take care of the special needs and should think about various assistive devices which can help them to pursue the courses and programmes smoothly. It may take time to learn and adapt the new programs and some of the special devices nevertheless, it needs to be started somewhere. It is time now to let the people know that the doors of the technology are open for everyone in the community.

Inclusive Education through Open & Distance Mode

Education of disabled people has marched a long way; from special to integrated and now, from integrated to inclusive. “Education for all” is the slogan of this millennium. Providing education to the unreached including people with various disabilities is one of the prime goals of all conventional, correspondence and distance education institutions. Quality education not only ensures an all-round development but also produces masterminds who can contribute for the growth of the nation. The growth and development does not mean the development of a single individual rather the development of all sections and all groups in the society. The educational needs of people with various disabilities can be addressed through open and distance learning system to a large extent. One way of defining Distance Education is to provide education to anyone, anytime and anywhere with the use of multiple media and technology. Various other open universities in India including IGNOU are providing high quality, innovative and need based education at different levels in a flexible manner and at a reasonable cost. Open educational institutions are moving towards making education individualized and need based for the people with special needs. Here, an attempt has been made to explore the ways and means for accommodating students with disabilities in distance education through inclusive practices.

Educational services are moving from the classroom at formal institutions of higher education to sites in businesses and community agencies, as well as totally off-site using electronic technology. Not only are the higher education institutions changing, but so are the learners (E.H. Paist, 1995, PP.11-20.). Increasing numbers are attending on a part-time basis and view learning as a lifelong process. Many students with disabilities wish to enroll in post-secondary education using distance learning, or continue with some form of post-secondary education through distance learning. Students with disabilities may participate in distance learning opportunities for various reasons. Some students may be unable to leave home or hospital. Others may participate in such programs due to increase flexibility regarding scheduling and due to increase control over the environment in which they perform their academic work. Distance learning may be an option which would permit the students to access educational alternatives in order to pursue an academic degree or attain other educational goals.

Therefore, it may be impossible to bring together a group of people with a common desire to increase their knowledge but, it is possible to bring the University to them. Open universities should emerge from behind their walls and seek out those who cannot come to them of their own accord. This presupposes greater competence of distance teaching universities in adapting study organisation and study contents to the need of the disadvantaged students. Face-to-face institutions in higher education also have the possibility to complement their programme/course offer with distance teaching modules that are tailored to the requirements of the disadvantaged groups in general and specifically for disabled. This group needs a system of services and aids in order to be able to realize independent forms of studying and learning. It can easily be achieved by adopting inclusive practices and various support mechanisms. Here, inclusiveness refers to universal accessibility or accessibility for all from every prospects; starting from the admission in a course/programme till successful completion of it. We have to adapt the principles of universal design and universal accessibility. By applying the principles of universal design we can make the programmes/courses inclusive or accessible. In addition to this, assistive technologies work as enhancers or extra

tools to ensure the usage of various services given to the students. This support system must take into account their individual needs and should create the necessity for an alternative reliable support system in higher education.

With a partial modification in the existing system this can be made disabled friendly. By the use of multiple media and technology (Daisy format, E-text with video and audio clippings, use of Edusat, interactive radio counseling) a quality higher education can be ensured to these sections who largely depend on such techniques.

In terms of learning needs, it is invidious to treat the disabled students as a separate category. Rather, these students fall along a range of learner differences and share similar challenges and difficulties that all students face in higher education. Sometimes the barriers are more severe for them, but sometimes not. Arguably, in the long run, the main beneficiaries of disabled friendly mechanisms and the need to make suitable adjustments in advance are the non-disabled students, because many of the adjustments, such as well-prepared handouts, instructions given in writing as well as verbally, notes put on-line, and variety and flexibility in forms of assessment, are simply good teaching and learning practices which benefit all students (G. Tudor, PP.43-49.). One unintended consequence of this (disability) support mechanisms are that as departments and institutions introduce more flexible learning and alternative ways of assessment for disabled students, demand is likely to rise for giving greater flexibility for all students.

In Conclusion

As educators, we must be careful in the selection of appropriate tools and methods that will allow the students to do their work efficiently. While designing the curriculum, we should take care of the special needs and should think about various assistive measures which can help them to pursue the courses and programmes smoothly. The important thing is to let the disabled learners feel that they are welcomed. No one can anticipate everyone's needs, but one can let them know that

he or she is willing and prepared to work with him/her for accommodating them to the best of his/her ability. It may take time to learn and adapt the new methods and some of the special techniques. But it needs to get started somewhere. Responsible bodies should not wait until a disabled person applies to do a course/programme or tries to use a Service, rather they should think about what reasonable adjustments they could make beforehand. They should anticipate the requirements of disabled students and should make the necessary adjustments for giving them better accessibility. Therefore, it is needed to spread the information that the doors of all educational institutions are open to everyone in the community.

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