Access to Equality in Education for Children with Disability through Inclusive Education

Dr. Vandana Singh
Lecturer, School of Education, IGNOU
E.mail: vandana.ignou@yahoomail.co.in
vandana@ignou.ac.in

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Historically, attempts towards development and ensuring equality and justice for all have been done to conform to the norms and systems of the society. Quality basic education is a fundamental human right. However, many continue to be denied this right and the opportunity to enjoy its many benefits because of limited access to the participation in the education system. Through inclusive education, one can respond to the diversity of needs of all learners and thereby reducing exclusion to and within education system. Hence, inclusive education is a means to achieve fundamental right to education for all.

The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Spain in 1994, and was reaffirmed at the World Education Forum, the challenge of getting all children into school has been put on the political agenda in many countries and is reflected in the Right to Education Bill in India also.

An important prerequisite for inclusive education is have respect for differences, respect for different learning styles, variations in methods, open and flexible curricula and welcoming each and every child. In other words, inclusive schools are learner-centered and child-friendly. There is also a need to shift in perspectives and values so that diversity is appreciated and teachers are given skills to provide all children, including those with different learning needs, quality education.

This paper will attempt to analyze the origin, concept and practices of inclusive education; also it focuses on a critical element of the inclusive education as a challenge towards achievement of equity for students with disabilities. It will also explain the nature of barriers will be confronted to inclusive education and suggest the approach for successful its implementation.

Introduction

One of the greatest problems faced by the world today is the growing number of individuals who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the society.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report (2008, 2009) sends a warning to governments that goals of EFA can't be met by 2015 if the problem of inequality in education is not dealt properly, as education leads to an empowered and fulfilled life.

Keating (1996) successful change or transformation in the next century depends on the creation of a "learning society". The first step to achieve this goal is to provide learning opportunities that will foster the full development of learning potential in all learners. This has an implication for providing personally challenging, individually appropriate educational programme to all students, even those with exceptional learning needs. This is possible only in a flexible education system that assimilates the needs of a diverse range of learners and adapts itself to meet these needs.

According to the 2005 Global Monitoring Report, "Education should allow children to reach their fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities". Education for All means ensuring that all children have access to basic education of good quality by crating an environment in where learners both able and enabled to learn can learn. Such an environment must be inclusive, effective, friendly and welcoming to all learners.

Disability a Developmental issue

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 10% of any population is disabled (Thomas, 2005a). Also, DFID (2000) highlighted the relationship between disability and poverty. It was pointed out that disability could be the reason for poverty because it can lead to isolation and economic strain for the whole family, also the denial of education because of disability can lead to a lack of employment opportunities. Similarly, poverty can lead to malnutrition, dangerous working and living conditions (including road accidents) bad health and maternity care, poor sanitation, and vulnerability to natural disasters – all of which can result in disability. It is clear that if this group is ignored then it is very difficult to achieve the complete developmental goal.

According to an estimate only 2.5-6% of the population may have a disability, with approximately 98% of children with disabilities not attending any type of educational institution, the current provision (specialist or mainstream, government or NGO) is clearly not enough to attain EFA. At the core of inclusive education is the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1949 but disability is clearly a development issue that we ignore at a price, including that of human rights. Alur (2002) stated that if

a person with a disability is dehumanised by cultural belief or stigma, as they are in India, then they can be 'invisibilised' and not considered worthy of rights. While there are also very important human, economic, social and political reasons for pursuing a policy and approach of inclusive education, it is also a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) asserts that:" Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all"

Meaning of Inclusive Education

The discussion on inclusive education started with proposal of the social model of disability, which proposes systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) as the ultimate factors defining disability. This shift in the idea came when it was realized that children in special schools were seen as geographically and socially segregated from their peers and failure of meaningfully integrating students in mainstream schools (integration). Inclusive education is not only limited to mainstreaming the learners with special needs but also concerned with identifying and overcoming all barriers to effective, continuous and quality participation in education.

Booth (1996) has seen inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 1994).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949), the United Nations General Assembly Charter (1959) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child(1989) all acknowledged education as a human right. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) suggested "inclusion" in mainstream education to be the norm so that all children have the opportunity to learn.

The Millennium Development Goals endorsed at the UN Millennium Development Summit (September 2000) targeted the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and the achievement of universal primary education as its first two goals. Inclusive Education (IE) offers a strategy for reaching disabled children and adults and other marginalized or at risk groups, who normally

constitute the poorest of the poor in developing country. Hence, Inclusive Education has been seen both as getting learners into and through learning institution by developing schools that are responsive to the actual, diverse needs of learning communities. Hence, it can be seen as a device for both access and quality which are also fundamental aspirations of EFA and MDG action frameworks.

In the broadest sense it is an approach which enables both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem. It also relieves individuals from the clutches of marginalization and exclusion.

One of the important parameter for quality education is to welcome the diversity and to provide flexibility in learning. Also, we have learnt that the quality of learning can be enhanced by the diversity of student involvement. An inclusive approach to education also strives to promote quality in the classroom by putting flexibility interms of offering every individual a relevant education through a range of methods and individualized learning and variation in optimal opportunities for development personal growth of all learners.

Researches have also shown that Inclusive education results in improved social development and academic outcomes for all learners as it provides opportunity to get exposed to the real world which leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions. It also provides platform to the non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes, tolerance and actions towards learners with disabilities. Thus, inclusive education lays the foundation to an inclusive society and participatory society by accepting, respecting and celebrating diversity.

Barriers and Suggestions for Implementing Inclusive Education

While we cannot neglect the importance of inclusive education it remains unanswered why the practice of inclusive education is presenting problems. It appears that it is both at the level of government policy but rather at the level of implementation. While the policy states that all children should go to school – and governments are enforcing this rule – in many cases quality learning is not taking place, which is contradictory to the ethos of inclusive education. The reasons for the non implementation of the inclusive education in India, is because of various barriers which according to Johan (2002) are both external and as well as internal. The external barriers are confronted before coming to and getting enrolled in schools, which includes physical location of schools, non-availability of school, social stigmatization or economic conditions of the learners.

The internal barriers are mostly psychological barriers like self concept, confidence etc which are sometimes imposed by the external factors and first step to remove the internal barriers is to remove the external barriers. The following are some of the external barriers.

1) Attitudinal Barriers: It has been noted that disabled students suffer from physical bullying, or emotional bullying. These negative attitudes results in social discrimination and thus leads to isolation, which produces barriers to inclusion. Regarding disabled children some regions still maintain established beliefs that educating the disabled is pointless. It is sad to note here that these barriers are caused by society, which is more serious to any particular medical impairment. The isolation which results from exclusion closes the doors of real learning. The negative attitudes often develop due to lack of knowledge. Along with information about disability or condition, their requirements must be provided to peers, school staff and teachers as well. Increasing interactions between learners with special needs and community through organization of fairs, meetings etc. It is also very important to counsel the parents of these learners, especially in rural areas about the importance of providing education for developing self-reliant individuals. There is also a need to shift in perspectives and values so that diversity is appreciated and teachers are given skills to provide all children, including those with different learning needs, quality education.

Also, at the policy level, it should be mandatory for all to educate about disability, so that a responsive individuals who respects disability could be developed.

2) Physical barriers

Along with the attitudinal barriers which are faced by the learners on the daily basis, another important barrier is the physical barriers, which includes school buildings, playgrounds, washrooms, library etc. Apart from this, the majority of schools are physically inaccessible to many learners because of poor buildings, particularly rural areas. Since most schools are not equipped to respond to special needs, poses blockage for learners in physically getting into school. For example, many of the students require a personal assistant for such basic activities as taking lunch in recess, personal care, remedial education efforts.

Most school buildings don't respond to the requirement of these learners properly. For example, if there is a ramp, sometimes it is too steep, often the doors were too heavy for the student to open unaided which impedes the access.

Hence, it is important for implementing the inclusive education in schools, it is important to overcome such physical barriers. Along with basic changes in the architectural designs such as widening doorways, removing unnecessary doors, installing proper ramps, technology could be used in the form of motion sensors to open doors, flush toilets and automatic door buttons for easier access through doors. Voice recognition technology can also used for activating many of the above-mentioned barriers. Since, there is an inadequacy of resources available to meet the basic needs in education, it is estimated that for achieving the

inclusive education goal will require additional financial support from the government.

3)   Inappropriate   Curriculum   as   a   barrier

In any education system, the curriculum is one of the major obstacles or tools to facilitate the development of more inclusive system. Curriculum includes the broad aims of education and has its implications on transactional and evaluation strategies. In our country of diversity, curriculum is designed centrally, hence which leaves little flexibility for local adaptations or for teachers to experiment and try out new approaches. This results in making the content inaccessible and demotivating. Therefore, the design and development of specific learning and teaching materials and teaching arrangements should take cognizance the needs, interest, aspirations and uniqueness of the learners. Elliot (2002) reports on changes being attempted in American schools where students 'learn social skills and group work in environment that celebrates diversity.'

As a result of the knowledge based curriculum, the examinations are also too much content oriented rather than success oriented which is the demand of flexible inclusive curriculum. Supovitz & Brennan (1997) as cited by UNESCO, 2003argued that , "while knowledge-based examinations are recognized to have their limitations in terms of both validity and reliability, formal standardized tests may also have adverse effects, such decontextualized facts and skills; ranking and sorting schools and children; narrowing the curriculum as teachers concentrate their teaching on the information, forms and formats required in the tests; and reinforcing bias in terms of gender, race/ethnicity and social class."

In the inclusive settings, assessment of learners must be against the broad aims of curriculum and education and also must be evaluated against their own achievements rather to be compared by others, which will be truly individualized.

Also, it is suggested that the assessment has to be continuous, based on the feedback of both learners and the teachers. This will surely help learners also teacher's in selecting appropriate teaching methods and styles.

As a consequence, all learners can be evaluated against their own achievements as opposed to being compared to other learners. Portfolio assessment can also be used. This would include learners' own products such as final 'best' work, various works in progress, samples of tests completed, certificates earned, goals met, daily work samples, self-evaluation of the progress of learning and teachers' observations (UNESCO, 2003).

4)   Untrained   Teachers   as   Barrier

For implementing the inclusive education successfully, it is important that teachers must have positive attitudes towards learners with special needs. But, because of lack of knowledge, education, understanding, or effort the teachers give inappropriate substitute work to the learners, which eventually leads to learners dissatisfaction and poor quality of learning.

Another important feature of the schools is high teacher–student ratios (average 1:45) and where it is expected that learners of diverse abilities have to be taught together. At the first place, there is a scarcity of trained teachers to deal with the diversity and secondly, it is very wrong to assume to deal with 45 learners with diversity.

Hence, it is important to reduce the teacher- learner's ratio in the classroom, which is only possible if we have more schools with trained teachers to deal with the diversity of learners.

At present, training to teachers is fragmented, uncoordinated and inadequate taking place in a segregated manner i.e. one for special children and another for students with general capabilities; both of them are preparing teachers for the segregated schools. However, there is an effort by SCERT, DIETs in providing ongoing training programme, which are not adequate because of various reasons. Therefore, it is important that an inclusive teacher education programme must be designed which can foster proper skills among teachers.

5) Organisation of the Education System

In our country, there are different types of schools such as private, government; public schools are developing inequality by offering differential levels of facilities and support. Those having an access to private schools have higher possibility of success as compared to those who go to government schools. Therefore, it is important like many developed countries, the common school system policy must be place properly. There is also a lack of information within many systems and often there is not an accurate picture of the number of learners excluded from the school system. Very often this leads to a situation where these learners do not have equal opportunities for further education or employment.

Conclusion

Disability is seen as a developmental issue in any economy, as the disabled group is often being marginalized due exclusion from the society and thus leading to poverty. Inclusive Education approach doesn't only provide the basic human right to education but also dignity which is often being linked with the socio economic status. It is seen as a device for both access and quality education which are also fundamental aspirations of EFA and MDG action frameworks. Through, inclusive education the learners gets a chance for not only getting into the system but also a support to complete it successfully.

Inclusive education results in improved social development and academic outcomes for all learners as it provides opportunity to get exposed to the real world which leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions. It also provides platform to the non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes, tolerance.

An important prerequisite for inclusive education is have respect for differences, respect for different learning styles, variations in methods, open and flexible curricula and welcoming each and every learner. A success of any learner is dependent on both school and community, but, both of then poses barriers in the implementation of the inclusive education policy. These barriers are both external and internal in nature and in order to facilitate inclusive education there has to have a modification in the environmental conditions, which includes the physical changes in the school buildings and increased number of schools. Apart from that, very importantly there is a need to change the negative attitudes and more responsibility towards learners with special needs, which can be brought about by policy changes. There is a need to provide proper training to the teachers dealing with the diverse needs of the learners, applying appropriate individualized pedagogy and assessment system. Also, this training must be continuous.

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