

Are the teaching practices in a mainstream classroom having Children with Special Needs inclusive? Reflections in the Indian context

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Introduction:

The policies and acts in the developed and the developing countries have been framed in favour of 'Inclusion' and 'Education for All' for more than two decades. Yet the consensus drawn from these experiences is that all the way down to the line from government policy to school policies, curriculum adaptation to classroom management, it poses a great challenge.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), The UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Actions envisage and support 'Inclusion' as an opportunity to bring every child under the roof of equality of education and further support it as a right of children with Special Education Needs (SEN) to have mainstream school education. (Thomas G.& Vaughan M. 2004). Booth & Ainscow (2002) view Inclusion on three Dimensions as (1) Producing inclusive practices, (2) Evolving Inclusive Practices, (3) Creating Inclusive Cultures and establish these dimensions as models for Inclusion. It is a challenge for any school to move ahead with these dimensions and confront with whatever that is creating impediments in realizing inclusion.

'Inclusion' leads to diversification in the classrooms and this calls not only for the development of inclusive values and ethos in the school policies but also for developing collaborative and responsive teaching in the classrooms. Teachers require better teacher preparation to meet the needs of the class. The bandwagons of Inclusion and mainstreaming sound very good but the actual situations in the classrooms tell a different story. The exclusionary approaches exist during the learning situations even though it may not be intentional. This begs for a question here as, How justified it is to include a child in a classroom and then restrain him from manifesting his potential to learn the same lessons as his fellow students? It is no doubt that values such as equality and Educations for all underpin the noble thought of 'Inclusion' but it demands for better preparation for development of inclusive cultures and inclusive practices. This article will discuss these pressing issues in my country and conclude with a hope of better implementation of model of inclusion if it is to be realized in its noble thought.

Inclusive practices in Classrooms: The Indian context

India has diversified culture and traditions with diversity in dress, language, customs and beliefs. It believes in secularism by constitution, which further underpins ethos of Inclusion. However, for ages, inclusive education remained unpracticed and there was more and more support for special education for children with disabilities. Since the 1990's, the movement towards inclusion has become rigorous. The term 'Inclusion' is used in the official correspondence and children with special needs have gained legislative significance (PWD Act, 1995; RCI Act, 1992; National Trust Act, 1999). The law mandates for the school policies to include children with special needs in the mainstream classrooms. The government schools are more obligated to these mandates than the private schools. These government schools cater to majority of Indian population (Kalyanpur M. 2008) even in the rural areas. The children with special needs living in the neighbourhood attend these schools with the majority of them having poor living conditions.

The picture looks rather effective on paper but the implementation in reality is quite challenging. The resource scarcity in schools, lack of teachers and the unwillingness of the itinerant teachers to go to these schools, over sized classrooms make inclusion practice feeble in the actual classroom. Drawing from my experiences of the visits I made to schools in my city of Ahmedabad in India, the SEN children in the municipal school's (The municipal corporation in the cities in India are mandated by the state government to run schools) classrooms show visible attendance. Nonetheless, majority of the time they are left unattended by the teachers in the classroom. This is not always because the teacher is unwilling to work but it is also because of lack of training to these teachers to address to special needs in regular classrooms. It also compels us to look at the policy makers and reflect on it as "Should these policies be always top down?" As most of the times, it becomes teacher's responsibility to implement the policies in classrooms. The teachers strive hard to respond to the diversity in the classroom, within the education system that is more of a mark based system and promotes competition among pupils to get better scores. The teachers have to prove their competence skills based on the percentage score of pupils in their class. Hence, the teacher has to focus more on the target syllabus rather than quality education.

As Ainscow, Howes, Farrell and Frankham (2003) cited in P.Bartolo.et.al,(2007) have argued

"Values and attitudes consistent with inclusive principles alone provide no guarantee of inclusive and responsive practices, since the intensive encounters

that occur during a typical lesson can often leave little room for the experimentation and innovation required in the process of attempting to reach all pupils....." (p 311)

There is little scope for teachers to implement innovative teaching approaches in the diverse classroom. Most of the time a teacher is rather managing the child with special needs in the classroom by addressing to the needs of SEN as well as targeting to the syllabus completion for the rest of typical children in classroom. Majority of the times the teacher has to shift from special to normal children within the classroom and has to cater to majority of pupils in the classroom, this further leaves the survival of SEN children in mainstream schools in a dilemma . As a result, the parents of children with special needs have to strive hard for the sustainability of their child in mainstream school.

There has always been a major thrust of responsibility on part of teachers to build an inclusive classroom. The teachers are expected to gain positive attitude towards every child's potential and respect each child as equal but this cannot happen so soon as it is a process that involves another dimension of 'Inclusion', that is inclusive cultures. Advani and Chadha (2002), cited in Singhal N. , (2005) emphasize on good teaching practices as solely responsible for 'Inclusion' that endeavors to meet the challenges of special needs in inclusive classrooms. This is true, but these good teaching practices need a supporting system that challenges, encourages and promotes innovative skills in teachers and enhances reflective thinking into one own teaching practices.

Inclusive cultures in classrooms in Indian Context:

In the three dimensions of Inclusion, the inclusive culture forms the base of the triangle as the values and collaborative relationships developed in the schools will strengthen the other two dimensions of policies and practices (Thomas and Vaughan 2004). This is rather a challenging and self-evolving process as values and beliefs themselves need to be challenged in order to gain full participation of children with SEN not only in the curricular activities but also in the culture of the school settings, which further demands cooperation and collaboration from the society. This can be had through the acceptance of the disability and children with special needs in the society. Further, leading to the thought is "should these values develop in the society and reflected in the school cultures?"

In India, schools are perceived as a mirror of the society .They play a major role in contributing to the personal and social development of the child and hence the responsibility of developing cultures vests with the schools. This is much dependent on the awareness about disability and the related issues in the society wherein disability is much stigmatized and perceived as fruit of some evil in the 'previous birth' (Alur 2001). The social stigma attached to disability that prevails in society restricts one to see a child beyond disability. With such prevailing beliefs, children with special needs are in the classroom as 'included' for the sake of inclusion. Teachers and other peers do not regard them as active participants in the class. This makes comradeship among peers in the classroom unequal. More often, the peers in primary classrooms show natural acceptance towards children with special needs. However, these relationships remain limited to social interaction and rarely materialize into peer tutoring. These interactions become even more difficult when the children enter the adolescent age.

I agree with Reiser and Mason (1992 cited in Thomas and Vaughan 2005) about the perception for disability as it is not attained right from birth but is rather acquired from the adults, media and the way a society is organized. Majority of times it is the organization of society that imposes the exclusions. The Sparling's survey (2002, cited in Glasgow, McNary, and Hicks 2006) finds social inclusion as hampered by various factors and some of these include lack of knowledge about the disability, the school policies with a focus on success and achievement and the problems of proper communication and interaction due to disability factors of SEN children. Apart from this, the parental perception of both the typical children and the children with special needs play important role in shaping inclusive cultures. The parents of the typical peers are often apprehensive about peer grouping with the children with disability lest their child might regress. As for the parents of children with special needs there is always a notion that their children will be neglected in the regular classroom for curricular activities. As Villa and Thousand State:

"parents of children with disability do not believe that their child's needs can be met in general education. They expect a choice about placing their child in a classroom, resource room, special class or special school. Does inclusion eliminate parental choice?" (p170)

The school policies in the Indian system provide very little choice to parents in deciding the type of education they want to provide to their children be it a special or a typical child. The special schools are running in an old traditional model from training children to daily life skills

to providing some basic vocational education. In this scenario, the integrated schools provide some programme for children with special needs. On the one hand, the government advocates inclusion of SEN children in mainstream schools but on the other hand due to lack of proper monitoring and guidance, the resources developed for these children remain unutilized. Children with special needs often get limited to respite care in the school rather than participation in the academic activities in the classroom. The professionals are of the opinion that these children are given access to mainstream school, which would have been denied due their disability factor. (Singhal 2008) This shows a kind of obligation on the part of service providers on children with SEN. More over the class size is big with no teaching assistant in class. The class design is not learner oriented. The conventional and traditional class designs of children sitting in a row provide little scope for children to participate in classroom activities. Drawing from my experiences of school visits, the pupils with SEN, find difficult to match in the group work or activity in the class. Frosted and Pijl (2007) show similar conclusion over the three indices namely peer acceptance, friendships and cohesive subgroup that almost 25% of pupils remain withdrawn from social inclusion in peer group in their class. This again depends on the level of social competence of the child, teacher's attitudes and the organization of the class. Nevertheless, along with the limitation, if the child is encouraged to participate, engage in problem solving activities in the class then there is respect for the child's individuality.

The Recent Developments:

The 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan' (Education for All) more commonly known as SSA plan, is an initiative for inclusive education in India since 2004. This includes education of children with disabilities. We can say that inclusion has gathered momentum through this programme. However, the prerequisites laid by the District Primary Education Programme, 1999 (DPEP) such as, the child should be able to interact in group, should not get distracted, should be able to follow instruction in class, should be knowing daily life skills (p 15 of DPEP, cited in Singhal N 2006) limit the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools. Though it is argued that these prerequisites are laid down in order to create awareness about readiness of SEN children in mainstream school and increasing awareness and responsibility on part of parents for their children, such exclusionary parameters are creating a discrimination by laying the responsibility on the 'child' for being included (Singhal 2006). It also means that a child failing over any of these prerequisites will have less access to the mainstream school.

Many schools in urban areas have started with integration of SEN children in the schools by providing the curriculum of National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) (NIOS 2005, cited in Singhal 2006) that is different from the national curriculum. This open schooling system provides opportunities to those children who cannot access the regular education due to various reasons. The children with SEN follow this curriculum, as it is equivalent to universal elementary education of the general education. This facilitates the children with special needs to participate in academic learning at his pace. Nevertheless, it raises concerns about the actual participation of SEN pupil in the mainstream classroom (Singhal 2006).

Hopes for future:

To take the benefit of the changing paradigm, efforts of improving teacher skills is necessary. Singhal (2006) expresses her concerns over teacher education in India as being categorized as either general education or special education, which is much theoretical, and not providing enough practical experience. Along with this, proper curriculum adaptation is equally required.

Along with this, the teachers should be helped to reflect and suggest different forms of actions and behaviours to achieve inclusive education. In order to empower teachers to meet the diversity of needs in classrooms, it is necessary to equip them with proper rehabilitation skills so that they can address to the needs of SEN children in classrooms. It is very much necessary for the schools to formulate better inclusive policies where in the orientation to disability and special needs is provided to the pupils in the school for better acceptance of special needs. Along with this, involvement of parents and family members is necessary to use their support in planning instructional strategies for children with SEN (Glasgow, McNary, Hicks, 2006). One of these good school policies can be less emphasis on learning English language, as this type of language-based approach might not be effective. Instead, more of pictorial or role play can be useful (Evans 2007) Moreover, the differentiation form of learning much advocated by Lewis (1992 cited in Rose and Howley 2007, p19) provides choice of learning to pupils in class. These differentiations can be categorized as differentiation in terms of content, interest, pace, access, outcome, curricular sequence, structures, teacher's time, teaching styles, levels and grouping. These forms of good practices call for the need to provide the stakeholders with the knowledge and skill for strengthening the inclusive practices.

In India, the TDI (Teacher Development Initiative) Approach, (UNESCO paper) shows good hopes for inclusion. The project as being implemented in three phase, aims to train teachers to organize their teaching strategies to meet the educational needs of all children in the classroom. The teachers need to develop reflective thinking and adopt problem-solving approach to meet the needs of whole class teaching. The significant phase of this project is the action research project in phase three where in the effectiveness of UNESCO teacher education pack is measured by transition in teacher and pupils attitudes to teaching and learning and in terms of pupils' achievement. Christine Lloyd (2002) emphasizes on action research as a tool that can enlighten and empower the teachers in developing inclusive education for all. This also creates a lot of debate about inclusion. In the ulterior motive of this debate lies a careful thought of sustaining the learner centered approach as 'child' is in the centre and therefore, a meaningful teaching and learning for the child is equally important.

However, going back to earlier points raised in the paper, discussion, in India the process of reflective thinking has begun with 22 institutions all over the country joining the TDI project. It has well developed aims and objectives of making the teaching process as learner centered. The reforms in the curriculum and the resource material need to be absorbed in the teacher training courses and this can be realized with the support of the Ministry at the centre as well as the state governments. Many more institutions and teachers need to join in this process and become change agents for better future in Inclusive classroom.

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