

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive Education is a process for increasing participation and reducing exclusion, in a way that effectively responds to the diverse needs of all learners. This means adapting the educational system to meet the needs of individuals, rather than changing the individual to fit the system. Inclusive education aims to ensure the participation of all students in quality education, The need for progress on inclusive education is crucial, especially given the context of international targets such as the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education by 2015 and the goal of Education for All (EFA) by 2015. These goals are achievable only if the persons with disabilities are included.

KEYWORDS: Disability, Education for All, Inclusive Education, Millennium Development Goal

INTRODUCTION

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.

Education is a fundamental human right; a right that is denied to over 70 million children and nearly 800 million adults. Of the 70 million children out of school, one third of those are children with disabilities. Education for all is achievable; however for these goals to be reached, among other things, there must be enhanced educational provision for all students, including students with disabilities.

According to UNESCO, inclusive education hinges on three things:

- The physical presence of students within the mainstream schooling system;
- Their full and active participation within school life;
- Their achievement of the highest standard that they are capable of with the development of new skills.

A major factor towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the education system is addressing the attitudes and skills of teachers. A focus on child-centered training can encourage teachers to be able to meet and support individual student needs.

Inclusive education strives for addressing the learning needs of children with special needs, with a particular focus on those who are being isolated and excluded. The philosophy behind inclusive education is to promote opportunities for all children to participate, learn and have equal treatment, irrespective of their mental or physical abilities. While the awareness on inclusive education in schools throughout the country is still at an infancy stage, educational institutions are somewhat skeptical about having both normal and special children studying in the same classroom. And in circumstances, where a former excluded child is given admission into a mainstream classroom, the outcome of the action is questionable.

Lack of flexibility in curriculum, inability to fend for themselves and thus being bullied by others in the class and not getting adequate attention from the teacher are common issues. All these may result in the child not getting a fair inclusive education. As a result, the number of children with special needs receiving higher education is on the decline.

In India majority of children with special needs do not receive any formal education, in spite of the practice of inclusive education in some schools. This is because children with disabilities and learning deficiencies are segregated from mainstream schools and other regular routines and social activities of normal children. Other contributing factors to this situation are lack of affordability and awareness on the kind of education choices available to children with special needs. Hence, inclusive education becomes a key reason for integrating a special child with the mainstream. For this inclusive schools have to be well-equipped in all aspects to cater and deliver quality education for all children.

This includes having a balanced curriculum that is appropriate for all categories of children, teachers who have the ability to handle the individual needs within the classroom and thereby promote an environment where personal development, social skills and student participation are strongly encouraged. Another critical aspect of inclusive education for a special needs child is in having the acceptance and friendship of classmates. This kind of support also aids in the progress of special children and helps them gain confidence within the school environment. Further, parents have a vital role as partners to make inclusive education successful within the classroom. This is possible when the children with special needs continue to live at home and attend school, just like normal children. Parents should also be involved with the teachers and administrative staff at the school to coordinate travel arrangements, school activities and learning materials for their special child. It's time to restructure all of our schools to become inclusive of all of our children.

Inclusion is founded on social justice principles in which all students are presumed competent and welcomed as valued members of all general education classes and extra-curricular activities in their local schools — participating and learning alongside their same-age peers in general education instruction based on the general curriculum, and experiencing meaningful social relationship. The largest study of educational outcomes of 11,000 students with disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study, showed that when students with disabilities spent more time in a general education classroom they were more likely to score higher on standardized tests of reading and math; have fewer absences from school; experience fewer referrals for disruptive behavior; and achieve more positive post-school outcomes such as a paying job, not living in segregated housing, and with having a broad and supportive social network. These results were true regardless of students' disability, severity of disability, gender or socioeconomic status.

Some studies even show that implementing inclusion on a school wide basis improves achievement for all students. And just as important as academic outcomes are the attitudes and values that all students learn when they are educated together.

EDUCATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSION

The Constitution of India and the educational policies envisaged in post-independent India reflect a perseverance and commitment to the fulfillment of UEE (Universalisation of Elementary Education). The Constitution states that 'free and compulsory education should be provided for all children until they complete the age of 14 years'. The first education commission in India (Kothari Commission, 1964–66) addressed issues of access and participation by all. It stressed a common school system open to all children irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic condition and social status.

In 1968, the National Education Policy followed the commission's recommendations and suggested the expansion of educational facilities for physically and mentally handicapped children, and the development of an 'integrated program' enabling handicapped children to study in regular schools.

Two decades later, the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986) stressed the 'removal of disparities' in education, while attending to the specific needs of those who had been denied equality so far, Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) (1986). It stated 'the objective should be to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth, and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence.'

In 1987, to fulfill the provisions for disabled children in the NPE, the government launched the Project for Integrated Education Development (PIED). It states 'wherever feasible, the education of children with motor handicaps and other mild handicaps will be in common with that of others.' According to the NPE, 'the indicators of integration are that handicapped people enjoy the same rights as the rest; have opportunities for growth and development in environmental conditions available to the rest; have access to the quality of life like any other citizen; and are treated as equal partners in the community.'

The program of action outlined measures to implement the policy including massive in-service training programs for teachers; an orientation program for administrators; the development of supervisory expertise in resource institutions for school education at the district and block level; and provision of incentives such as supply of aids, appliances, textbooks and school uniforms.

The NPE underwent modifications in 1992 (MHRD, 1992). It made an ambitious commitment to universal enrolment by the end of the Ninth Five-Year Plan for both categories of disabled children: those who could be educated in general primary school, and those who needed to be educated in special schools or special classes in general schools. It also called for the reorientation of pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. The NPE (1986) and revised NPE (1992) are the guiding policies at all levels. The most notable pedagogical recommendation is as follows. 'Curriculum flexibility is of special significance for these children. Special needs for these children will be met if child-centered education is practiced. Child-to-child help in education of the children with disabilities is an effective resource in view of large classes and multi-grade teaching.'

Another significant policy development in India took place following the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) proclamation on full participation and equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific Region in 1992.

The Equal Opportunities and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 1996 called for the education of children with disabilities up to the age of 18 years in an appropriate environment. The act grants 'equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation' to people with disabilities. It includes a number of provisions that 'endeavor to promote the integration of students with disabilities into normal schools'. It also upholds the role of special schools by asking schools in the government and private sector to promote their establishment. Although there is no specific mention of inclusive education in the act, it is judged to be breakthrough legislation relating to education and economic rehabilitation of people with disabilities.

THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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.

The purpose of education is to ensure that all students gain access to knowledge, skills, and information that will prepare them to contribute to communities and workplaces. The central purpose becomes more challenging as schools accommodate students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and abilities. As we strive to meet these challenges, the involvement and cooperation of educators, parents, and community leaders is vital for the creation of better and more inclusive schools. Research shows that most students learn and perform better when exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum, as long as the appropriate strategies and accommodations are in place.

At no time does inclusion require the classroom curriculum, or the academic expectations, to be watered down. On the contrary, inclusion enhances learning for students, both with and without special needs. Students learn, and use their learning differently; the goal is to provide all students with the instruction they need to succeed as learners and achieve high standards, alongside their friends and neighbors. Many years ago, special classes were created for students with special needs. Special educators felt that if they could just teach these students separately, in smaller groups, they could help them to catch up. However, the reality is that students in segregated special education classes have fallen further and further behind. Over time, we have learned that inclusive education is a better way to help all students succeed.

BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

Benefits of Inclusion for Children with Special Needs

- Gives a sense of belonging
- Provides a stimulating environment for growth
- Evolves in identity as a member of a community
- Enables social skills development
- Provides opportunities to develop neighborhood friends
- Enhances self-respect and concepts of self-awareness
- Provides peer role models

Benefits of Inclusion for Typically Developing Peers

- Provides opportunities to experience diversity of society

- Develops an appreciation that everyone has unique characteristics and abilities
- Develops respect for others with diverse characteristics
- Develops sensitivity toward others' limitations
- Develops feelings of empowerment and the ability to make a difference
- Increases abilities to help others
- Develops capacity for empathy

Benefits of Inclusion for Adult Leaders and Teachers

- Helps adults appreciate the diversity of society
- Helps adults recognize that all students have strengths
- Creates an awareness of the importance of direct individualized attention
- Increases ways of creatively addressing challenges
- Teaches collaborative problem solving skills
- Develops teamwork skills
- Acquire different ways of perceiving challenges as a result of being part of a multi-disciplinary team
- Enhances accountability skills

Benefits of Inclusion for the Community

- Promotes the civil rights of all individuals
- Supports the social value of equality
- Teaches socialization and collaborative skills
- Builds supportiveness and interdependence
- Prevents emergence of negative social behaviors
- Provides children a miniature model of the democratic process

CONCLUSIONS

Thus from the viewpoints presented above it is quite clear that we have reached the tipping point where it is no longer educationally or morally defensible to continue to segregate students with disabilities. We shouldn't be striving to educate children in the least restrictive environment but rather in the most inclusive one. The purpose of education is to ensure that all students gain access to knowledge, skills, and information that will prepare them to contribute to communities and workplaces. In the words of Jangria (1997) "I would like to see the distinctions between words like 'special education', 'regular education' and inclusive education disappear. The practice in these movements will be absorbed in the world education." "Children who learn together, learn to live together."

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