

Inclusive Education: Policy & Perspective

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It is of crucial importance that all children and young people have access to education. However, it is equally important that they are able to take full part in school life and achieve desired outcomes from their education experiences. While subject based academic performance is often used as an indicator of learning outcomes, 'learning achievement' needs to be conceived more broadly as the acquisition of the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills required to meet the challenges of contemporary societies. Adults need to be provided with learning opportunities as well since the ultimate goal of inclusion in education is concerned with an individual's effective participation in society and of reaching his/her full potential. To ensure active participation of the persons with special needs the United Nations declared 1981 as 'the year of the disabled.' Later on the decade of the 80's was declared as 'the decade of the disabled.' After that UNO declared 1983-92 as International Decade of the Disabled. Later on 1993-2002 was declared ESCAP decade of the disabled which is extended up to 2012. This resulted in major initiatives the world over. There was a spurt of ambitious legislation in many countries, including India. India enacted three very important legislations. The Rehabilitation Council of India Act came into force in June 1993 conferring statutory status on the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which is responsible for training policies and programmes. The Persons with disabilities Act 1995 (Equal opportunities protection of rights and full participation) came into force in February

1996 and National Trust Act (For the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities) 1999. It was an important landmark and a significant step to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities and their full participation in national development.

Objectives and Rationale

The objectives of these guidelines are to assist countries in strengthening the focus on inclusion in their strategies and plans for education, to introduce the broadened concept of inclusive education and to highlight the areas that need particular attention to promote inclusive education and strengthen policy development. The Dakar Framework for Action clearly paves the way for inclusive education as one of the main strategies to address the challenges of marginalization and exclusion in response to the fundamental principle of EFA, namely that all children, youth and adults should have the opportunity to learn. In both developed and developing regions, there is a common challenge: how to attain high-quality equitable education for all learners. Exclusion can start very early in life. A holistic lifelong vision of education is therefore imperative, including acknowledging the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes to improve children's well-being, prepare them for primary school and give them a better chance of succeeding once they are in school. If children do not have the opportunity to develop their potential through education, their own and future families are also at risk of staying poor or of

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sliding into more chronic poverty. Subsequently, linking inclusion to broader development goals contributes to the development and reform of education systems, to poverty alleviation and to the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals.

Development of Educational Services for Children with Special Needs:

Inclusive education gains momentum with the World Declaration of Education for All (1990) at Jomte in, Thailand, where it was emphasized that the learning needs of the disabled demand special attention within the Framework of Education for All. It means being proactive in identifying the barriers that many encounter in accessing educational opportunities and identifying the resources needed to overcome those barriers. In 1994 at the World Conference at Salamanca a Framework for Action was adopted that promoted integration and participation of persons with disabilities to combat exclusion. More than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations considered the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, thereby enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs. Although the immediate focus of the Salamanca Conference was on special needs education, its conclusion was that: 'Special needs education – an issue of equal concern to countries of the North and the South – cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of the ordinary school'. An 'inclusive' education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive' - in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities. The Conference proclaimed that: 'regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating

discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system'.

This vision was reaffirmed by the World Education Forum meeting in Dakar, April 2000, held to review the progress made since 1990. The forum declared that Education for All must take account of the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged, including working children, remote rural dwellers and nomads, ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people and adults affected by conflict, HIV and AIDS, hunger and poor health, and those with disabilities or special learning needs. It also emphasized the special focus of girls and women. Inclusion is thus seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.

In India, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act ensures that every disabled child has access to free education in an appropriate environment till the age of 18 years and government provides for setting up of special schools, facilitation for imparting special education and education through open schools/universities to disabled children, organizing teacher training programmes, taking steps for adaptation of curriculum, reform of examination

system, promoting research and providing various facilities to disabled children. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006, which advocates for inclusive education, and recent legislation to protect indigenous languages, both provide further international support for inclusive education. They set out the central elements that need to be addressed in order to ensure the right to access to education, the right to quality education and the right to respect in the learning environment. Later on in 2016, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill was passed by government of India which replaced the existing PWD Act, 1995, which was enacted 21 years back.

Moving Policy Forward:

The success of creating inclusive education as a key to establishing inclusive societies depends on agreement among all relevant partners on a common vision supported by a number of specific steps to be taken to put this vision into practice. The move towards inclusion is a gradual one that should be based on clearly articulated principles that address system-wide development and multi-sectorial approaches involving all levels of society. The barriers to inclusion can be reduced through active collaboration between policy-makers, education personnel and other stakeholders, including the active involvement of members of the local community, such as political and religious leaders, local education officials and the media. Some important steps include: -

- Carrying out local situation analyses on the scope of the issue, available resources and their utilization in support of inclusion and inclusive education.
- Mobilizing opinion on the right to education for everybody.
- Building consensus around the concepts of inclusive and quality education.

- Reforming legislation to support inclusive education in line with international conventions, declarations and recommendations.
- Supporting local capacity-building to promote development towards inclusive education.
- Developing ways to measure the impact of inclusive and quality education.
- Developing school and community based mechanisms to identify children not in school and find ways to help them enter school and remain there.
- Helping teachers to understand their role in education and that inclusion of diversity in the classroom is an opportunity, not a problem.

Creating an Inclusive Curriculum:

An inclusive curriculum addresses the child's cognitive, emotional, social and creative development. It is based on the four pillars of education for the twenty-first century- learning to know, to do, to be and to live together. It has an instrumental role to play in fostering tolerance and promoting human rights, and is a powerful tool for transcending cultural, religious, gender and other differences. An inclusive curriculum takes gender, cultural identity and language background into consideration. It involves breaking negative stereotypes not only in textbooks but also, and more importantly, in teacher's attitudes and expectations. Multilingual approaches in education, in which language is recognized as an integral part of a student's cultural identity, can act as a source of inclusion. Furthermore, mother tongue instruction in the initial years of school has a positive impact on learning outcomes. An inclusive approach to curriculum policy has built-in flexibility and can be adjusted to different needs so that everyone benefits from a commonly accepted basic level of quality education. This ranges from varying the time that students devote to particular

subjects, to giving teachers greater freedom to choose their working methods, and to allowing more time for guided classroom-based work.

Many curricula expect all pupils to learn the same things, at the same time and by the same means and methods. But pupils are different and have different abilities and needs. It is important, therefore, that the curriculum be flexible enough to provide possibilities for adjustment to individual needs and to stimulate teachers to seek solutions that can be matched with the needs, abilities and learning styles of each and every pupil. This is particularly important in the development and practice of learning activities for youth and adults. The concept of inclusive education questions a large part of the traditional school's way of organizing and arranging teaching. While schools must have general or common goals for what is appropriate and desirable for pupils to achieve in school, the demands relate to different school subjects must be seen in the context of the individual pupil's opportunities and needs.

Teachers and the Learning Environment:

The way teachers teach is of critical importance in any reform designed to improve inclusion. Teachers must make sure that each pupil understands the instructions and expected working modulates. Similarly, the teacher him/herself must understand the pupil's reaction to what is being taught since teaching only has meaning and relevance if the pupil acquires its content. Teachers thus need to be educated in alignment with these expectations. Introducing inclusion as a guiding principle has implications for teachers' practices and attitudes – be it towards girls, slow learners, children with special needs or those from diverse backgrounds (cognitive, ethnic and socioeconomic). Teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion depend strongly on their experience with learners who are perceived as 'challenging'. Teacher

education, the availability of support within the classroom, class size and overall work load are all factors which influence teachers' attitudes. Negative attitudes of head teachers, inspectors of education, teachers and adults (parents and other family members) are major barriers to inclusion. Thus, empowering all of these individuals, equipping them with new confidence and skills in the process of introducing inclusion as a guiding principle, will have implications for teachers' attitudes and performances.

It is important to focus on creating an optimum learning environment so that all children can learn well and achieve their potential. This involves learner – centered teaching methods and developing appropriate learning materials. ICTs and the use of new technology constitute a vital part of modern societies and should be used whenever possible. Activities that make schools more effective include: school readiness activities that ease the transition from home to school for grade one pupils, teacher training on child-centered techniques such as asking pupils questions, assigning the best teachers to the early grades to ensure a solid foundation in literacy and numeracy, providing mediation to pupils at risk of failure, improvement of classroom management and using language that is adapted to a child's level of understanding, including initial literacy in the mother tongue.

Supporting the Policy Cycle:

Inclusive education systems and societies can only be realized if governments are aware of the nature of the problem and are committed to solving it. This must be reflected in the willingness to undertake in depth analysis of the size and character of the out of school population and ensure their integration into quality school and other kinds of education and training programmes. Such analysis would frequently require improved data systems and data collection methods. Government commitment would also express

itself in appropriate legal frameworks established in accordance with relevant international conventions and recommendations ensuring that inclusive education is appropriately understood and interpreted as a rights issue. Its priority in national policy, planning and implementation should be reflected in the comparative allocation in national budgets and in requests for development assistance from international partners and the private sector. Appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be put in place to evaluate the impact of inclusive education policies as regards the learner, the education system and wider socialite development.

Conclusion:

Despite of increasing facilities and awareness to CWSN there is a clear indication that there is a huge gap between the educational needs and the facilities available to CWSN in the inclusive schools. The task of teaching CWSN is faced with a lot of inherent and external problems that derail teacher practices. It is an establish fact the classroom practices of teachers are sometimes changed to suit learner needs, however, the situation whereby the basic material that will facilitate the CWSN to learn is not available would increase the task of the teacher in inclusive classroom. Added to that, the low known-how by teacher on how to utilize the little resources available to pupils could jeopardise the learning rate of the CWSN since most of them learn from what their instructor teach them. On this note it is assumed that since teachers lack the right training in handling such pupils and also on the devices in teaching them, they are likely to act on their impulse and that could even worsen the education of such pupils. The teachers have to play a very crucial role in the implementation of the educational policies. This means that inclusion of children with

disabilities in the mainstream is possible only if the teachers are provided with skill training to address to the learning needs of special children in a regular class.

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