Inclusive Education in India: a Paradigm Shift in Roles, Responsibilities and Competencies of Regular School Teachers

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Abstract

The success of inclusive education programmes depends on a number of variables. One of such variables, and perhaps the most important one, is the regular classroom teacher. The nature of their work has undergone a tremendous change since the implementation of inclusive education programmes in India. They are now required to perform a number of additional tasks in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. This paper first discusses the change in their roles and responsibilities in the context of inclusive education. It then provides a review of literature on additional competencies that they would need to have in order to be successful in inclusive classrooms. A brief application of this information for programme planners and administrators is also discussed.

Introduction

The landscape of the education of students with disabilities in India has undergone a tremendous change in the last three decades. The focus of meeting their educational and social needs has shifted from a segregated setting to a more inclusive one. Their needs currently are increasingly being met alongside their non-disabled peers. Such change, however, did not come overnight. It required hard work,

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perseverance and dedication from all stakeholders including policy makers, administrators, teachers, parents and researchers. Policy makers in India were challenged by legislative developments in other countries (e.g. IDEA, 1990) and the initiatives made by the United Nations (e.g. Millennium Development Goals, 2000) to implement legislations, policies and programmes (e.g. PWD Act, 1995; SSA, 2001) that fostered more equitable educational opportunities for all students. Parental groups became more vocal and asserted their rights by demanding equal opportunities for their children. Administrators, teachers and researchers witnessed the inclusive education models that worked well in other countries and started to adopt those models in their schools. Thus the inclusive education initiative that was being implemented in the rest of the world, particularly in developed nations, also gradually paved its way into Indian schools. Incremental progress has been made towards this endeavour during the last three decades and benefitted thousands of students. However, much work still needs to be done to meet the needs of about 30 million children with disabilities in India (Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities, 2007).

Regular School Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities in Inclusive Education

Special education students in India also have high hopes and aspirations as their counterparts do in western countries. They not only need the teachers with right attitudes but also with appropriate knowledge and skills that will help them realise their dreams. The literature on inclusive education is unanimous about no matter how excellent the educational infrastructure might be, how well articulated educational policy might be, how well resourced a programme might be, effective inclusion does not take place until regular classroom teachers deliver relevant and meaningful instruction to students with disabilities (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2010). A well- trained classroom teacher is the single most important factor in the success of inclusive education programmes. Studies suggest (e.g. Sanders and Horn, 1998) that the quality of the teacher contributes more to learner's achievement than any other factor, including class size, class composition, or background. It is the regular classroom teacher who is charged with the primary responsibility of providing instruction in classrooms that are now characterised by student diversity. Parikh and Dhylon (1988) make a similar statement by saying "it is the regular class teacher who is the indispensable professional who carries the primary responsibility during integration" (p. 57). Thus, regular school teachers are now expected not only to develop the appropriate curriculum but they also have to define, interpret and deliver it. It is what the regular classroom teachers believe and what they do in the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of educational programme that students with disabilities receive.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms requires regular school teachers to upgrade their skills to respond to the new challenges provided by their changing roles and responsibilities. These teachers are

now expected to address problems and offer solutions to challenges posed by special needs students who may vary in their skill levels. They are now required to undertake initial screening of at-risk students, adapt instruction to make them responsive to special needs students, participate in Individualised Education Programme (IEP) meetings, work collaboratively with parents and other professionals, and use technology to assist students overcome their deficits.

Kochhar and West (1996) emphasise that in inclusive education classrooms regular school teachers are required to teach 'content' differently. It must be integrative, flexible and interdisciplinary. In contrast to traditional, teacher-centered instructional approaches in which the teacher stands in front of the classroom and 'lectures' to the entire class, in the inclusive classroom the focus shifts from teaching to learning. Teachers are now required to create situations in which active student learning is maximised. Peterson (1988) argues that the regular classroom teacher is now viewed primarily as a "thoughtful professional", one who is able to understand the relationship between teaching and learning as well as enhance the cognitive functioning of students with disabilities. Sindelar (1995) asserts that a regular school teacher needs to be a professional diagnostician, a decision maker and an instructional manager in order to deal effectively with the challenges posed by exceptional learners. He further says that this professional should be in the best position to assist these students in working with the group, to follow routines and to comply with accepted standards of group behaviour.

It can be seen that the roles and responsibilities of regular school teachers have been extended following the introduction of inclusive education programmes. It now includes the responsibility of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in addition to meeting the needs of their non disabled peers. It is therefore imperative that regular school teachers have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to fulfill their new roles and responsibilities.

Regular School Teachers' Competencies for Inclusive Education

Current reform efforts, toward school restructuring aimed at implementing effective inclusion programmes present significant challenges for regular school teachers. The success of these efforts depends primarily on the responsiveness and willingness of these teachers to meet the educational and social needs of students with varying abilities. These teachers are now required to have a number of additional skills and competencies, not generally practiced in regular education classrooms. The Open File on Inclusive Education (UNESCO, 2001) suggests a number of demands be placed on teachers' from the perspective of inclusive curricula such as, regular teachers' involvement in curriculum development at local level, their skill development for curriculum adaptation, management of a complex range of classroom activities, providing support to students' learning, working outside the traditional subject boundaries and

in culturally sensitive ways. A number of authors (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2010; Kochhar and West, 1996) argue that these teachers are now expected to perform almost all of the role functions as that of a special education teacher. The difference, however, is that they have not received an intensive training in those skills as special educators have. This paper will highlight those additional competencies that regular school teachers need to have in their repertoire in order to be successful in inclusive classrooms.

These teachers are now expected to incorporate the adaptive dimension in all their efforts for students with special needs. As Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) note:

> Deeper knowledge of and greater confidence in teaching their subject(s); developing better expertise in classroom management so that more time can be devoted to instruction; knowing how to teach mixed-ability classes; being aware of and becoming proficient in new teaching strategies like co-operative learning or 'whole language' approaches to learning; and becoming knowledgeable about and able to respond to the different learning styles of their pupils– attention to all these things can certainly help teachers increase their pupils opportunities to learn (p.2).

According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2010), regular school teachers need to be knowledgeable about the learning styles and the motivational patterns of students with disabilities. These teachers also must have a clear understanding of the resources and support systems which are available to assist them for working with students with disabilities. They should present information to the students in a manner which enables them to assimilate the information more easily. Vaughn and Bos (2012) suggested a number of strategies that regular school teachers would need in order to accommodate students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment. These include peer tutoring, cooperative learning, mastery learning and applied behaviour analysis. The literature also points out that regular classroom teachers are required to use instructional strategies such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2003), activity-based learning (Krishnaswamy and Shankar, 2003), individualised and adaptive instruction (Jangira, Singh and Yadav, 1995) and culture specific pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching (Valmiki, 2003) to facilitate disabled students' learning outcomes in regular classroom environment.

The Council for Exceptional Children (2010) developed and validated a common core of minimum essential knowledge and skills necessary for entry into professional practice in special education. They included: 1. philosophical, historical and legal foundations of special education; 2. characteristics of learners; 3. assessment, diagnosis and evaluation; 4. instructional content and practice; 5. planning and managing the learning environment; 6. managing student's behaviour and social interaction skills; 7. communication and collaborative partnerships; and 8. professionalism

and ethical practices. Although all of these skills may not be essential for regular classroom teachers, a certain level of proficiency in these competencies, however, is required from these teachers when they are expected to work with special needs children. Of the many competencies that have been identified in this paper, there are some that are field tested and advocated as potential methods for delivering effective instruction to students with diverse learning needs. There are many but some of them, that are widely used, include: class-wide peer tutoring (Stephenson and Warwick, 2002), cooperative learning (Jenkins, 2003), self-management skills (Snyder and Bambara, 1997), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2003) and use of assistive technology (Dimmitt, et al., 2006). The school teachers especially need to be proficient in those skills for effective instruction delivery and appropriate management of a classroom that is characterised by diversity.

A number of attempts have been made, especially in western countries, to identify the competencies that regular school teachers need to work effectively with students with disabilities. A variety of methods including literature reviews, survey of educators and other stakeholders, classroom observations, examination of teachers' daily records, experts' opinions, and initiatives of professional organisations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) have been used to identify such competencies. A wide range of respondents including students with and without disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, special and regular education teachers, school principals and teacher educators have been surveyed to identify these competencies. As a result, several lists of essential teacher competencies have been generated; all of which are context and situation specific. These competencies have been classified under the following seven categories. Each of them will be briefly discussed regarding their relevance to inclusive education followed by a brief review of literature on that competency. The seven core competencies include:

1. Professional knowledge
2. Classroom management
3. Collaboration
4. Assessment and evaluation
5. Instructional techniques
6. Individualised and adaptive instruction
7. Assistive technology

1. Professional Knowledge

Professional knowledge in the context of inclusive education includes a knowledge and understanding of: 1. basic terminology and concepts used in special education; 2. various disabling conditions; 3. a rationale and history of inclusive education; 4. policies, programmes and legislations related to inclusive education; and 5. rights, roles and responsibilities of parents, students, teachers and other professionals as they relate to individuals with special learning needs.

Payne and Murray (1974) conducted a survey of school principals regarding the competencies needed by regular school teachers to work effectively with students with disabilities. The principals

ranked the knowledge of disabling conditions as the most important competency for these teachers. Results of the needs assessment conducted by Gear and Gable (1979) revealed that the teachers in Alabama, USA indicated a high need of training need in the 'professional knowledge' competency area. In a study carried out by Goodspeed and Celotta (1982), the researchers surveyed 37 university professors and 64 regular school teachers to identify the competencies that regular school teachers considered most important, to work with students with disabilities. Both professors and regular school teachers reported 'knowledge of disabling conditions' as the most important competency for regular school teachers to work in inclusive education classrooms.

Sharma (2002) had also reported that Indian teachers require information on the types of disabilities, curriculum adaptation, educational implications, and skills and strategies required for meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

2. Classroom Management

Classroom management for inclusive education includes the knowledge of: 1. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA); 2. basic classroom management theories, methods and techniques for individuals with exceptional learning needs; 3. research-based best practices for effective management of teaching and learning; 4. materials arrangement; 5. organisation of aids and support services; and 6. creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

The diversity in the classrooms presents a variety of management challenges for regular school teachers. For example, students with special needs, particularly those diagnosed with Emotional and Behaviour Disorder (EBD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), may present unique behavioural challenges for these teachers. According to Wang, Haertal and Walberg (1993) effective classroom management has been found to contribute more to school learning than curriculum design, classroom instruction, student demographics, home support and school policy.

As a supportive educational environment has a significant positive impact on overall learning of students with disabilities, Nielsen (1997) argues that regular classroom teachers need to be competent in creating a positive psycho-social environment for all students including those with disabilities. In addition to the psycho-social environment, the physical aspects of a classroom also exert a great influence on the inclusive classroom environment. The physical environment includes such aspects as arrangement of desks, lighting and temperature. Placement of the special needs child in the classroom, in relation to the rest of the students, is also equally important. Depending on the severity of the child's disability, the teacher should be able to decide the proximity control. Such control can be easily handled in primary schools. However, a secondary student's proximity control should be handled carefully as many of them do not like to be identified or singled out. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the

regular classroom teacher to adapt and adjust the physical and psycho-social arrangement of the classroom to be responsive to the needs of the student with a disability.

3. Collaboration

Friend and Cook (2010) describe collaboration as an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems. An ever increasing diversity in the classrooms has made it necessary for regular classroom teachers to work with special education teachers, parents of students with disabilities, school psychologists, para-professionals (such as speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, recreational therapists, etc.) and instructional assistants. Their shared expertise and shared ownership of problems make the likelihood of success for the programme greater than if these educators attempted to deal with the problems in isolation. Friend and Cook (2010) point out that collaboration between regular school teachers, parents of students with disabilities and other school staff is one of the most important issues in the education of students with disabilities in regular school settings.

Using a Delphi technique, West and Cannon (1988) conducted a study involving 100 experts from 47 states in the USA to identify essential collaborative consultation competencies needed by both regular and special educators in inclusive education settings. These experts rated awareness of consultancy theory and models, ability to communicate interactively and solving problems collaboratively as the most important collaborative-consultation skills for regular school teachers who are involved in the implementation of inclusive education programmes.

Regular school teachers could use the following collaborative strategies in order to provide effective instructional programmes to students with disabilities: peer collaboration, co teaching and teacher assistance teams. Peer collaboration involves pairs of teachers working together to solve classroom problems. Pugach and Johnson (1990) found that teachers using this strategy are likely to have significant fewer problems. Friend and Cook (2010) defined co teaching as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single space (p.109).This is an effective way to utilise each teacher's strengths. Abundant research is available showing the benefits of co-teaching to improve academic achievement of not only students with disabilities but all students (Friend and Cook, 2010; Hart and Whalon, 2008). Teacher assistance teams are also known as support teams, intervention assistance teams or planning teams. In this strategy, a group of teachers meet and brainstorm options for a teacher experiencing problems in the classroom.

4. Assessment and Evaluation

According to a number of writers (McLoughlin and Lewis, 2001), regular school teachers are required to demonstrate competency in assessment in order to identify the specific needs of students with disabilities. Taylor

(2000) points out that assessment, the process of using testing and other formal and informal means of measurement to make educational decisions, is one of the most valuable skills for a regular classroom teacher to have in the implementation of inclusive education programmes. The teachers are required to employ not only basic skills such as gathering learning and background information of students with disabilities, but also, highly specialised skills such as selecting, administering, scoring and interpreting standardised measurement instru-ments (McLoughlin and Lewis, 2001). Friend and Bursuck (1999) suggested that regular school teachers could use assessment information for six instructional and placement decisions for students with disabilities. These include: screening, diagnosis, programme placement, instructional evaluation and programme evaluation. The major decision related to diagnosis is eligibility for special education services. To some extent, regular school teachers will play a role in making placement decisions (such as a general education classroom, resource room or full-time special education classroom). Although the major decisions are made by school psychologists and administrators regarding the placement, regular classroom teachers will assist them in making such a decision as part of the multidisciplinary team.

An evaluation report shows whether or not teaching has been effective. It helps validate successful inclusive education programmes that should be continued and pinpoints problems that should be rectified. Wang, Anderson and Bram (1985) suggested that regular school teachers should be able to evaluate three aspects of student performance while evaluating their success in inclusion programmes: performance, attitudes and process. Performance measures relate to student's achievement in content areas. Attitudinal measures relate to included student's self-concept and their attitudes toward their teachers and non-disabled peers. Process measures encompass the types of interactions included students have with their teachers and peers.

Regular school teachers need to be knowledgeable about a variety of evaluation methods in order to determine the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. They need to demonstrate competency in performance-based assessments, portfolios and curriculum-based assessments. Performance-based assessments allow teachers to assess students' understanding and proficiency. These assessments allow students to construct a response, create a product or demonstrate what they understand and can do. Friend and Bursuck (1999) argue that these assessments are more likely to reveal student understanding since they call for students to apply knowledge and skills rather than to simply recall and recognise. Alternate assessments such as portfolio assessments are also effective ways of evaluating students with disabilities. Portfolios make it possible to capture the learning process over time as well as the assessment of nontraditional strengths and talents such as artistic or visual abilities of students. Curriculum Based Assessments (CBAs) also provide teachers with information on the demands of instructional tasks and allow them to determine the content and pace

of an instructional programme. Thus, in addition to providing information on a student's progress, CBAs help regular school teachers to match specific instructional practices and materials to a disabled student's learning needs, which results in improved performance on school related tasks.

In a research study, Mukhopadhyay (1990) found that regular and special education teachers in India identified evaluation as one of the most important skill for regular classroom teachers who work with exceptional children. Shukla and Singh (2011) suggested that a flexible and implementable scheme of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) assumes evaluation as a routine activity and exercise of teaching-learning process, and it encompasses all aspects of pupil's growth such as intellectual, physical, social, personal qualities, interests, attitudes and values through employing a variety of tools and techniques by an evaluation team. They argue that the CCE is the most suitable procedure due to its underlying principles of flexibility, functionality, accountability and economy in evaluating a child with disability in an inclusive setting.

5. Instructional Techniques

This skill is at the heart of all the competencies that regular teachers need to demonstrate while working with diverse student population. These skills are the ones that they ought to use on a daily basis to provide appropriate instruction to special needs students. A number of specific instructional techniques that regular classroom teachers would particularly need to be competent in include: differentiated instruction, activity- based and experiential learning, peer tutoring and collaborative learning. Each one of them has been field-tested and validated to demonstrate their effectiveness. They will be discussed separately for clarity and in order to avoid confusion. Other techniques that have also been field tested with students with special needs include response cards, guided notes, error correction and time trials.

Differentiated Instruction

In the past, regular classroom teachers used ability grouping to deal with variations in student skill levels. Gamoran (1992) reviewed the research on ability grouping and concluded that such an educational practice perpetuated low achievement and widened the gap between high and low achieving students. To overcome these difficulties and to successfully accommodate students with disabilities, regular school teachers needed to use differentiated instruction. This technique requires the teachers to teach one main lesson for all students with variations for each individual student's needs. It is an instructional approach that allows the regular classroom teacher to plan for all students within one lesson, thereby decreasing the need for separate programmes while permitting the teacher to weave individual goals into classroom content and instructional strategies (Tomlinson, 2003). Thus, a diverse group of learners share an instructional activity in which individually appropriate learning outcomes occur within the same curriculum area. Differentiated instruction allows students to learn from

one another in an atmosphere of human diversity. In such classrooms individual differences are the norm rather than the exception. This technique has been well received by regular school teachers who maintain that it is easier than preparing numerous lessons and that classroom instruction has coherence despite individualisation (Porter, 1997). In a research study Jangira et al. (1995) found that regular school teachers in India indicated very high level of training need in 'multi-grade teaching'.

Activity-Based and Experiential Learning

In those classrooms that present instruction passively or in isolation and use a lecture format as the dominant form of instruction, many students do not learn, retain and apply knowledge as effectively. Such instructional delivery methods are, therefore, especially difficult for students with disabilities who are included in regular education classrooms (Krishnaswamy and Shankar, 2003). These students require the teachers to present instruction that is activity-based and allows students to learn through personal experiences. With the use of activity-based and experiential learning, students become engaged in discovery, movement, interaction with the environment and manipulation of materials. Also, since such learning uses real-life activities and materials, skill generalisation and transfer are facilitated. According to Choate (2000) hands-on interactive instructional approaches to a lesson appeal to the senses and make it easier for students with disabilities to learn. Such active learning promotes student attention, increases on-task behaviour and decreases the incidence of negative behaviour. Freiberg and Driscoll (1992) found that students who were actively involved and engaged in lessons learnt better and faster than students who were "instructionally inactive".

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring is an instructional strategy that consists of student partnerships, linking high achieving students with lower achieving students or those with comparable achievement, for structured study sessions. A vast amount of research has been done to demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy in inclusive classrooms (Stephenson and Warwick, 2002; Fuchs, Fuchs, and Burish, 2000). Peer tutoring has been found to minimise problematic behaviours, increase opportunities to respond and enhance activity comprehension (Marchand-Martella and Martella, 1993). Peer tutoring is also found to be effective in improving on-task behaviour, math performance, reading performance and social interactions of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Fuchs et. al., 2000).

Cooperative Learning

A competitive classroom climate and educational approaches based on comparing pupils with a predetermined standard are not conducive to inclusive education. Cooperative learning, on the other hand, encourages students to work together to complete tasks and solve problems. In this approach, teachers are required to specify each student's role for the task, clarify the sequence of activities and monitor and evaluate

the interactions of group members. A number of authors have emphasised that regular school teachers need to be competent in the implementation of cooperative learning strategies to successfully include students with disabilities in their classroom activities (Jenkins, Antil, Wayne and Vadasy, 2003). These strategies have been found to enhance learning, improve inter-group relations, develop problem solving skills and improve the academic and social skills of students with special needs in regular education classrooms (Putnam, 1998). Studies have also demonstrated that teaching social skills to children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in cooperative groups in inclusive settings resulted in increased frequency, duration and quality of social interactions (Jenkins et. al., 2003).

6. Individualised and Adaptive Instruction

Individualised and adaptive instruction are educational approaches that recognise, anticipate and programme for variation according to the student's background knowledge, learning styles, motivation and personal interest. Individualisation or creating an educational programme that is tailored to the unique needs of a child with disability is the hallmark of special education. This is what makes special education different from regular education. However a fusion of both well-established stream of instruction is needed from regular school teachers if they are to serve all students in their classrooms including those with exceptionality.

A conceptual framework for instructional adaptations for students with disabilities was provided by Glaser (1977). He envisaged instructional adaptations as a process of choosing and applying an appropriate teaching action following an assessment-based determination that previous lesson for a student was unsuccessful. These adaptations, therefore, require teachers to implement alternative teaching actions such as modifying materials, assignments, testing procedures, grading criteria and varying presentation styles in order to enhance the success of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. Regular classroom teachers can also accommodate variations in learning styles by developing each student's educational programme using a range of environmental, physical, social and psychological conditions. For example, necessary adjustment of materials (e.g. highlighting essential content, varying sequence, reducing the length of assignments, alternate assignment presentation format such as visual, auditory, etc.) and useful learning aids (e.g. advanced organisers, checklists of steps, study guides, story starters, etc.) are part of individualised instruction. A vast amount of research shows that instructional adaptations such as variations in teaching materials and grouping arrangements lead to enhanced student outcomes (Vaughn and Bos, 2012).

7. Assistive Technology

Recent advances in technology for special-needs students has made it possible for these students to accomplish a number of tasks, while being in regular

education environment, that was not possible earlier. These include the use of ipads, Kurzweil 3000, Read and Write Gold and other communication devices. Therefore, it is imperative that regular classroom teachers have at least some level of knowledge and understanding in the use of such devices and software applications (Dimmitt et al., 2006).

In addition to the 'traditional' knowledge and skill domains discussed thus far, regular school teachers are now also expected to demonstrate ability in a number of emerging competencies. The 'new' competencies derive from the social dynamics that are impacting on the school curriculum. The emerging competencies include maintaining ethical and professional standards (CEC, 2010) and sensitivity toward the cultural background of students with disabilities who are from minority ethnic backgrounds (Mitchell, 2000).

Conclusion

The exemplary and promising pract-ices discussed in this paper offer a framework within which the aims of inclusive education in India may be realised. These practices also constitute the essential competencies that are needed by regular school teachers for the successful implementation of inclusive education. It is the acceptance, development and implementation of these knowledge, skills and competencies that provides the greatest potential for the success of inclusive education programmes in India. These practices also have the potential to create a unified system of education that would be responsive to the unique learning and social needs of students with disabilities in India. All stakeholders, particularly those that are charged with training and preparation of school teachers need to infuse these competencies in their pre-service and in-service training programmes. Regular school teachers who are already a part of the work force should be provided with adequate opportunities for professional development. In this regard, 'one shot' seminars or workshops would not appear to be the answer. Rather ongoing professional development opportunities should be made available to these teachers. David and Kuyini (2012) assert that teachers in India have benefited from in-service programmes which form "part of a long-term systemic staff development plan" rather than from "single shot" short-term programmes. Also, further research is warranted to determine the self-efficacy, current skill levels and training needs of Indian teachers in these skills as this information will help trainers to prioritise areas for training and plan short, and long-term goals.

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