

The Teaching-learning Conditions for Quality Education in inclusive Schools

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Abstract

There has been recent theoretical and policy interest in the two areas of quality education and inclusive education. Inclusive education has been already launched in our country through Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. This paper discusses the concepts of quality education and inclusion and then reflects at the Indian scenario with a focus on teaching-learning conditions in schools where inclusion is promoted.

Introduction

There are two terms 'inclusion' and 'quality education' which are in much circulation and use these days. While inclusion was stimulated in part by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and by a 'rights' agenda (Evans & Lunt, 2002), quality education gained prominence from Dakar Framework of Action (World Education Forum, 2000). The two terms bear concepts which are of much importance, and when combined together – quality education in inclusive schools becomes all the more important and relevant in the present Indian context.

Inclusion

The inclusion movement was born in the early 1980s with the advent of the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Special education, which continued to grow as a

separate system, unintentionally segregated students with disabilities and thereby leading to REI. The reform in special education increasingly became symbolised by the term 'inclusive schools' (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, p. 299). But there is no one view about inclusion (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994), rather a wide range of different conceptualisation and definitions of 'inclusion' exist (Evans and Lunt, 2002), which encompass a number of confusions (Hornby, 2001).

Full inclusion

Inclusion or 'full inclusion' is a principled and ideological stance as promoted by Thomas (1997), who suggests that "inclusion must be at the heart of any society which cherishes.....a liberal political system and a pluralistic culture: one that celebrates diversity and promotes

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fraternity and equality of opportunity” (p. 106). The ‘inclusive school’ according to advocates of ‘full inclusion’ denotes a place rid of special educators where *full* inclusion reigns (e.g. S. Stainback & W. Stainback, 1992). According to these advocates, “the concepts of Least Restrictive Environment – a continuum of placements and a cascade of services were progressive when developed but do not today promote the *full* inclusion of *all* persons with disabilities in *all* aspects of societal life” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1991; p. 52, emphasis in original). Therefore, “an inclusive school or classroom educates all students in the mainstream. No students, including those with disabilities are relegated to the fringes of the school by placement in segregated wings, trailers, or special classes” (S. Stainback & W. Stainback, 1992, p. 34). The advocates of full inclusion believe that “eliminating special education....will force general educators both to deal with the children it heretofore had avoided and, in the process, to transform itself into a more responsive, resourceful humane system” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). The focus of ‘full inclusion’ is “on socialization skills, attitude change and positive peer relations” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, p. 301).

Cautious or responsible inclusion

The other held views on inclusion are that of ‘cautious inclusion’ (Kauffman, 1995, Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994) or ‘responsible inclusion’ (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995, Hornby, 1999). The critics of ‘full inclusion’ proposed these forms of inclusion. They criticised full

inclusion on the grounds that “the quest for full inclusion contains a measure of expressive zeal which denies some of the realities of disability” (Low, 1997). Farrell (2000) pointed out “the very real difficulties one can get into if arguments about inclusive education are pursued solely in terms of human rights”. The primary concern of these critics is “strengthening the academic performance of students with disabilities and those at risk for school failure” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, p. 301). They did not advocate an end to special education; rather they wanted the teachers and administrators of special education to have a role in such inclusion. This view gets support from Reynolds (1989) who says, “We need to move special teachers (of students with mild disabilities) into mainstream structures as co-teachers with general teaching staff where both groups share in the instruction. The special education teachers can lead in such matters as child study, working with parents, and offering individualised, highly intensive instruction to students who have not been progressing well” (p. 10). Pijl and Meijer (1991) concluded from their study that ‘the countries seem to agree that at least 1.5 per cent of the students are difficult to integrate on a curricular level in regular education’. According to Palmer et al. (2001), parents who oppose inclusion largely indicate that the severity of their children’s disabilities precluded any benefit from such programs or that the general education classroom program would not be educationally appropriate or welcoming to their children. O’Brien (2001) in a recent volume on ‘enabling

inclusion', very rightly suggests that, 'we have to answer, with integrity, the questions about where and how a pupil learns best' (p. 49).

It has been pointed out by Norwich (1996, 2000 b) that the field of special needs education demands the balancing of multiple values such as those of quality, individuality, social inclusion and practicability, and the tolerance of 'ideological impurity'.

Quality Education

The World Bank while trying to define quality in education in the report 'Priorities and Strategies for Education' (1995) observed that "quality in education is difficult to define and measure. An adequate definition must include student outcomes. Most educators would also include in the definition the nature of the educational experience that help to produce those outcomes – the learning environment" (World Bank, 1995, p. 46).

Quality has also been dealt from a perspective of quality assurance and quality improvement as done by Morgatroyd and Morgan (1994) who give three basic definitions of quality:

1. Quality assurance which refers to "the determination of standards, appropriate methods and quality requirements by an expert body, accompanied by a process of inspection or evaluation that examines the extent to which practice meets these standards".
2. ".....contract performance, where some quality standards have been specified during the negotiation of forming a contract."

- (3) "Customer-driven quality refers to a notion of quality in which those who are to receive a product or service make explicit their expectations for this product or service and quality is defined in terms of meeting or exceeding the expectations of customers." (p. 45-46).

Another aspect of defining quality in education is whether quality is only a matter of learning things well. It has been argued by Education International (2004) that what you learn is also of crucial importance. "From this perspective quality is to learn the right things and to learn them well. It is not good enough to learn the right things only half well and it may be even worse to learn the wrong things well." (Education International, 2004).

Coombs (1985) in his description of quality says, "quality (.....) also pertains to the relevance of what is taught and learned, to how well it fits the present and future needs of the particular learners in question, given their particular circumstances and prospects. It also refers to significant changes in the educational system itself, in the nature of its inputs (students, teachers, facilities, equipments and supplies); its objectives, curriculum and educational technologies and its socio-economic, cultural and political environment." (p. 105).

For the sake of this paper, the definition of quality education (as adopted from ETUCE, 2002) is given as 'the education that best fits the present and future needs of the particular learners in question and the community, given the particular circumstances and

prospects. The quality concept also has to embrace the development of the potential of every member of each new generation.'

Providing quality education is the most obvious way for our country to move forward to secure the future of millions of children, improve the quality of life, sustain economic progress and promote social justice (Shivakumar, 2003). It is also the best way for our country to get rid of the tag of underdevelopment and backwardness by 2020 (Shivakumar, 2003) and compete in the global economy.

With this in background, it is pertinent to discuss the difficulties and problems encountered in our schools in delivery of education and what can be done to provide quality education in inclusive regular schools.

1. The Overburdened Teacher

In the present times, teaching is becoming a more and more complex task. A teacher has to perform the function of teaching, class management and guidance. Within teaching, a teacher has to plan his lesson, prepare or search appropriate teaching aids, teach in the classroom, give exercises and drill lessons, conduct unit tests and examinations, evaluate the students, prepare marksheets. Besides, he/she also has to organise and conduct co-curricular activities and engage in many other academic tasks.

Another function of a teacher is controlling the children and management of class (Bhatia & Bhatia, 1964). A teacher meets a large number of children and young persons from

different backgrounds with varying kinds of nature and abilities. Therefore, "it is no easy task to handle a class of children of different temperaments and varying tastes. There are shy children, extrovert children, mischievous children, and inattentive children." (Bhatia and Bhatia, 1964, p. 9).

Guidance is another important function of a teacher. He/she has to guide the students to right thinking and doing, to make right choices and decisions.

Meeting the parents, giving them feedback about their children's performances and listening to them is yet another duty of a teacher.

In addition to this, teachers are given more and more responsibilities like in mid-day meal programme, and engaged in other government duties such as election, census survey, and verification of ration cards (TOI, 2.8.05, p. 4).

With such a heavy work load, how can we expect a teacher to do justice with the teaching profession and that too when he has to teach the mixed group of students including slow learners, gifted students and different ability groups? Every student (able or with disabled) has different learning ability, different learning style and pace of learning. It is not hard to realise then that this makes difficult for a teacher to identify the appropriate level at which to teach, assess students' work and progress and evaluate one's own teaching.

Therefore, for quality education in inclusive school, teachers' burden must be lessened. With excessive load, teachers at their work places may undergo stress and tension which may lead to reduced efficiency and

productivity on the part of the teacher, and thereby bring down quality of education in inclusive setting.

2. Overcrowded Classes

The students' strength in the classes is unusually high in our schools, 1:100+ is the teacher-student ratio in schools of rural area of east U.P. (Kumar, 2004). Kumar (2004) is justified in saying that, "the idea that someone can use innovative methods to cope with that kind of ratio is a joke." Beginning teachers get reality shock when they face the real teaching situation after having completed practice teaching (Singh, 2004) in smaller classes with limited number of students. The teacher-pupil ratio of 1:40 which is considered an ideal one is often not met in the classrooms in villages, where there is a surge in public interest in education, as in U.P. (Kumar, 2004). Looking at the present circumstances there is less likelihood of reaching this ideal ratio in the immediate future.

To think of inclusive education and that too quality education in such an adverse situation where there is scarcity of teachers, is not only unrealistic but impracticable and unachievable. As Humayun Kabir has said, "teachers are the key to any educational reconstruction", without them we cannot possibly think of any education, leave aside inclusive education in regular schools.

The class-size needs to be reduced to give attention and care to all the students in general and the students with disabilities in particular. Many parents of children with disabilities

would perhaps be reluctant to send their children to such classes where proper care and attention is not given to them. Teachers' caringness and their attention to individual child are considered important and satisfying by the parents of children with disabilities (Green & Shinn, 1994).

So, more preparation of teachers and appointment of teachers is needed immediately to deal with the problem of educating the surging mass of students and improving the teacher-pupil ratio in our classrooms. Then only can we go ahead with the idea of inclusive quality education in general schools.

3. Scarcity of Special Teachers

There is an acute shortage of well-trained special teachers who are must for 'responsible inclusion'. Placing children with disabilities into regular education classrooms where there are no special teachers or resource teachers is tantamount to 'dumping' them. Specialists of all kinds are needed who can provide services to any student who may be in need. On the other hand, special teachers or resource teachers derive strength from the subject specific expert knowledge of regular teachers. Regular teachers with their expertise can help in teaching of concepts, application of concepts and principles related to specific subjects, such as, life sciences, mathematics or languages through innovative methods and devices.

Cooperation between special education and general education is necessary for 'responsible inclusion'. What the regular classroom teacher lacks can be improved by the infusion of

special teacher and vice-versa (Panda, 2003). In this way, the quality of education in inclusive schools can be ensured.

Since there is a dearth of professionally trained special teachers in our country, we can make do with itinerant resource teachers but they should be there in school daily for few hours. Unless this is met, quality education for students with disabilities will remain doubtful. It is advocated that more special teachers be prepared so that every regular school can have them.

4. Support System

Appropriate and adequate support services are needed for 'responsible inclusion' in regular schools. The school building and surroundings around it should be made barrier-free so that access to various parts of the school is easy for all children. It is seen that many schools even those with expensive architectural building, are devoid of ramps, hand-rails, low-level water taps, disabled-friendly toilets and signboards.

Children with disabilities sometimes require an intensity and systematicity of instruction uncommon to general education classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Advocates of children with hearing and visual impairments fiercely support

specialized services to their children. So, the school must have resource room facility where children with special needs can be given extra needed support. The equipments related to education should be easily available for the child when in need. The special equipments should be provided in the classroom too, where inclusive education is imparted to meet the special needs of students, if and when required. For example, classroom amplification systems, a form of assistive learning device, are needed to link teachers to students with hearing impairment. Similarly, anti-glare blackboards are needed for children with low vision and partially sighted.

Conclusion

The philosophy behind inclusion is praiseworthy but what is questionable is how we put theory into practice, how do we bring about inclusion and maintain quality in inclusive schools. Responsible inclusion is justified but even for this we need to overcome the difficulties and problems which exist in our regular schools. It will not be fair to compromise on quality in the name of inclusive education. Hence, the teaching-learning conditions must be changed as suggested and made suitable for the purpose.

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