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Engaging with Disability for a Common Right

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Abstract

Inclusion is the process of addressing and responding to diverse needs of all learners by encouraging and increasing their participation in the learning process. This entails reaching out to the learners and removing all barriers that could limit their participation in the learning process, and hence, progress and achievement. There are several social, physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers to inclusive education. 'Marginalisation in education' is a disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities. Inclusive education aims to ensure 'education for all'. It means that all children — no matter where they come from and the physical challenges they face — can learn together. Non-discrimination and equality are key human rights that apply to the Right to Education, a Fundamental Right enshrined in the Indian Constitution as well. This paper tries to understand inclusion from the perspective of disability.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a basic human right. It serves as a catalyst for social mobility and poverty alleviation, thereby, leading to economic growth. Hence, economic growth is directly proportional to quality education. Ensuring that all citizens get quality education must be the topmost priority of all nations, after health. Most countries endorse the principle of

equal opportunity in education. This implies that inequalities based on wealth, gender, ethnicity, language and region need to be eliminated.

'Inclusion' is viewed as an approach to education and society, concerned with increasing the participation of all, thereby, reducing all forms of discrimination and exclusion. Education for the disabled has become a matter of entitlement — a fundamental human right —

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rather than a privilege or charity (Alur, 2012). Social, economic and political inclusion of persons with disabilities is now a part of the international human rights movement, which emerged and developed throughout the twentieth century (Rioux, 2001). This human rights framework sets the stage for countries to support social well-being for all their citizens (Alur, et al., 2000; Rioux, 2001). Social well-being measures may be spearheaded with planning and implementation strategies for vulnerable groups, including Children With Special Needs (CWSN) and those belonging to disadvantaged or marginalised sections of the society.

Policy is seen as a course of action endorsed by government, authorities or State (Colebatch, 1998). The purpose of policies is to lay the groundwork for making them into laws (Dye, 1984). In policy making, a wide range of people with vested interests are involved, from differing concerns and varying relationships with each other (Pasteur, 2001). Policy formulation follows a certain set of patterns or activities, involving problem identification, formulation, legitimisation and evaluation. Issue identification is a crucial activity before decision making takes place (Alur, 2012). Decision making eventually leads to policy framing on issues. However, some issues may be against the interests of those in power (Walt, 1994).

Some sections of the society are so lacking in power that they

cannot even mobilise and articulate their demands (Luke, 1974). This is, especially, true of the disabled group in India. Children with disabilities are a minority often found in many marginalised groups that are catered to, such as girls, Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, and Other Backward Castes. However, with changes in approach and implementation, the situation is slowly improving.

After the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, an area in elementary schooling that has come into focus is 'inclusive education', which requires immediate attention of all stakeholders, i.e., administrators, educational institutions and teachers to name a few. Special schools are recommended for CWSN, requiring increased special education needs. They need the care and attention of not only a general education teacher but also a special educator.

Thus, CWSN would be welcomed and embraced in regular classroom setups. This will not only boost their confidence but also encourage them to participate in academic and non-academic activities. But one of the main causes of worry is the limitations of 'trained' special educators and resource persons. This constraint will adversely affect the dynamics of an inclusive setup.

DISABILITY MODELS

Various 'disability' models have been propounded down the ages. It traces the narrative from the earliest 'moral' or 'fate' model (treating disability

as destiny) down to the ‘medical’ approach (which rests on providing medical care and rehabilitation to the disabled). Then, there is a ‘social’ model as well that advocates the removal of environmental barriers and promotes inclusion of the disabled in society. Finally, it is the ‘interactional’ model that balances the ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models.

INITIATIVES FOR INCLUSION

Various policy initiatives on inclusive education spell out mainstreaming children with disabilities, apart from providing them with special education. At the implementation level, ‘inclusive education’ comes under the ambit of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), whereas, ‘special schools’ come under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. This implies that all mainstream schools, whether government-aided, private or otherwise come under the Department of School Education and Literacy, MHRD. According to the RTE Act 2009, all regular mainstream schools are inclusive, where all children, including CWSN and those from other disadvantaged groups of the society, study together. This process is a natural outcome of policy decisions at the Central level. But what is ironical is that special schools (where CWSN with moderate or above special needs and care study) receive attention only from the welfare perspective from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

For the past two-and-a-half decades, trends in educational provisions for CWSN have focused on their education in the same setup as their peers without special needs. The country has witnessed phenomenal expansion of educational opportunities but CWSN have not progressed proportionately.

However, the concept of inclusion is not new. The Education Commission (1964–66) in its report had stated the need for an integrated education programme. The government initiative in the area of inclusive education can be traced to the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, which recommended integrating the “handicapped with the general community” at all levels “as equal partners” and preparing them for normal growth, thereby, enabling them to face the challenges in life with courage and confidence.

It is essential to recognise that people with impairments face many barriers, such as discrimination, inaccessible environment, inadequate and ineffective policy and service support (Barton, 2012). The questions found embedded in inclusive discourses are — what underlies inclusion? Why is it imperative to have policies advocating the inclusion of children and adults with disabilities?

Against the backdrop of the RTE Act 2009, which calls for free and compulsory education of all children aged 6–14 years, several questions are pertinent that call for introspection. Some of these are as follows.

- Can we have an education system that would cater to diversity at least at the elementary level, i.e., covering children in the age group of 6–14 years?
- How best can the issue of implementing inclusion be addressed?

INCLUSION IN CURRICULUM AND TEACHER TRAINING

The National Focus Group Position Paper on Education of CWSN, which served as input for the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)–2005, states the ethical context that needs to be considered while framing policies on inclusion. The focus area needs to be on a ‘common system’ that would bring ‘all’ on a common platform rather than having different setups for different groups. Similarly, in the context of teacher training and inclusion, the prime focus needs to be on incorporating attitudinal change among teachers and teacher–educators. This must be followed by initiatives that delve in facilitating professional development of teachers and teacher–educators with knowledge and skills to handle inclusive classrooms. To have meaningful participation of CWSN in mainstream life, policies in all aspects, i.e., social, educational and economic, need to be implemented in letter and spirit.

CONCLUSION

Thus, inclusion can only take place if there is a conscious effort by all stakeholders to put inclusive values in practice not only in the school environment but society at large. Inclusive culture at the micro, school, educational institution or organisational level has to be mirrored in the macro, community and societal level.

An education system must, therefore, include all students and support them to learn, irrespective of their condition and challenges. This means ensuring that teaching and curriculum, school buildings and infrastructure, classrooms, play areas, transportation facilities, drinking water and toilet facilities meet the needs of all children.

Hence, policy implementation needs to be supported with changes in existing services. For inclusive practice to develop on a sustainable macro level, systemic failure and understanding of policy need to be addressed (Alur, 2012).

There should be advocacy building for CWSN and children belonging to marginalised sections of the society. The authorities concerned must see to it that the needs and demands of CWSN are met *in toto*. The government must enjoin upon itself to act regarding the meaningful inclusion of the challenged.

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