

Inclusion at Enrolment Level is Not Enough

Madhu Kushwaha

The article explains the policy ideas that have been presented for inclusion in schools and institutions in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the main problems in implementing them. A teacher from a teacher training institute expressed confidence that capable and sensitive teachers can become the bearers of the culture of inclusion in schools and other educational institutions.

No education system and process in the world, including that of India, can claim to be fully inclusive. Two reasons stand out – first, inclusion is a continuous process. When we fulfil the demands of inclusion at a level or for a group, the spread of educational facilities creates new social identities along with new demands from new students.

Second, the officials and teachers responsible for implementing inclusive educational policies are all members of the same society that has been justifying non-inclusive practices on various grounds for ages. Therefore, creating a positive attitude towards the principles of inclusion in everyone, especially in teachers, and building their capacities becomes the prerequisite for implementing the policies on inclusion.

Almost all the commissions on school education and higher education in India have underlined the need and significance of inclusion in their reports. The National

Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also puts significant emphasis on inclusive education.

Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality. Inclusive and equitable education - while indeed an essential goal in its own right - is also critical to achieving an inclusive and equitable society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, thrive, and contribute to the nation. The education system must aim to benefit India's children so that no child loses any opportunity to learn and excel because of circumstances of birth or background. This Policy reaffirms that bridging the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school education will continue to be one of the major goals of all education sector development programmes. *National Education Policy 2020, Chapter 6.1, Page 24*



Figure 1. When the teacher participates in activities, it helps in bridging the social divides.

The policy further states: The dynamics and also many of the reasons for exclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) from the education system are common across school and higher education sectors. Therefore, the approach to equity, equality and inclusion must be common across school and higher education. Thus, the policy initiatives required to meet the goals of equity, equality and inclusion in higher education must be read in conjunction with those for school education.

National Education Policy 2020, Chapter 14.2, Page 41

Inclusion in teachers' training programme

No plan to implement inclusive educational policies can succeed unless the capacity and attitude of teachers are developed for inclusion. This was the reason for including a course on inclusive education in the curriculum of the two-year pre-service teacher education programme implemented in 2014. The objective was that teachers not only understand the concept, principles, and significance of inclusion but also make it an integral part of their teaching behaviour and practices.

In my opinion, if a teacher has ever experienced inclusion in her educational journey, they can understand the principle of inclusion better and can put it into practice. Teacher education programmes can make their trainees learn the strategies of inclusive education in a better way and inculcate a positive attitude towards inclusion. In this article, I will talk about some of the efforts taken for inclusion in my teachers' training institute.

Developing a true and deep understanding of inclusion

Inclusion has several dimensions. However, most people, including students, understand inclusion only in the context of enrolment. They believe that giving preference in enrolment fulfils the purpose of inclusion and that the responsibility for success or failure in school is that of the students themselves. This understanding limits academic success or failure to merely a few individual factors, such as effort, hard work and intelligence, and fails to notice the socio-structural factors, facilities and barriers behind these. The prevalence of this superficial approach to inclusion, unfortunately, is pervasive and predominant in Indian society.

“ Inclusion, in its true sense, demands accommodation, adaptation and changes in the linguistic, curricular, learning and assessment methods, teaching and learning material, and the overall daily experiences within the school environment. ”

Inclusive enrolment is just the first step towards inclusion. Inclusion, in its true sense, demands accommodation, adaptation and changes in the linguistic, curricular, learning and assessment methods, teaching and learning material, and the overall daily experiences within the school environment.

To introduce teachers to the true and comprehensive meaning of inclusion is the responsibility of teacher training institutes. Trainees joining the teachers' training programme come from different educational backgrounds. Most of them believe that reservation in admission is inclusion, and they attribute academic failure to personal factors. Such a prevailing mindset makes it no less than a challenge to explain to trainee teachers that socio-structural factors play a decisive role in the success or failure of a student in school. The intersectional identity of a student based on their caste, gender and class creates for them a structure of facilities or deprivations in the school. Such structure is responsible for their success or failure. A student's innate intellectual abilities are not the only factor that is directly related to their success in school.

An effective strategy to explain the true meaning of inclusion is the sharing of the personal educational journey of the students (teacher trainees) in a class. I task them with documenting their personal educational journey for this purpose at the beginning of the course and ask them to think and write down answers to questions, such as: *What type of school did you attend? How much family support did you get in your studies? What did you want to study in higher education? Were you able to get admission to your desired course or institute? Did you face any difficulties in getting an education?* etc. If their answers reveal that they did not face any of these or just a few of these challenges, they are asked to write about the reasons or factors that made all this possible. Similarly, if they faced challenges in many or all of these, they are asked to identify the factors or reasons for it. Thereafter, I organise a discussion on their documentation, and the socio-structural factors responsible for school success or failure are thus identified based on their personal educational experiences. The students straightaway understand the relationship between gender identity and educational opportunities; class status and the opportunities for quality education and schooling in English medium, as well as the struggle of Hindi-speaking students and students with special needs to succeed in education.

Such discussions help these teacher trainees develop the understanding that even though reservations ensure some degree of inclusive enrolment, the school or institution still needs curricular and linguistic accommodation, and training in the access and use of infrastructural facilities (ramps, toilets, Braille printers, read-aloud computer programmes, etc.) so that all students can participate equally in the educational process.

Linguistic inclusion

The dominance of the English language in education in India is indisputable. English medium students have better access to course material and books, and more opportunities to participate in the classroom processes. This intimidates the non-English speaking students considerably. Both Hindi and English are acceptable as languages of instruction, but quality course material, reference books etc. are mostly available in English. Therefore, Hindi medium students feel excluded and constantly struggle with both the content and the English language in their learning process. When I provided some translated course material in Hindi, the students were pleasantly surprised and their participation in the class increased. My association with Azim Premji University's 'Anuvad Sampada' programme made this possible. 'Anuvad Sampada' is a vast online resource of material on various disciplines in education either written or translated in Hindi. Such access reduces the linguistic exclusion of students.

Inclusion in everyday school life

We understand that for students with special needs, educational institutions, especially schools, are challenging places. But when we talk of special needs, we consider only physical challenges. We generally do not include girls in this category. Their biophysical 'special needs' related to menstruation are not considered by planners, education officials and teachers.

A patriarchal mindset makes menstruation an issue of shame, stigma and impurity, and hence a 'culture of silence' surrounds it. The prevalent social notion that a girl or woman should manage her menstruation 'silently' and privately is detrimental. Neither a demand for public discourse finds prominence on this essential issue nor are facilities for menstrual management demanded in schools. Inadequate health education about menstruation is a global public health issue and it either facilitates or hinders our perception of several human rights.

Menstruators require certain facilities in school. The lack of such facilities affects their inclusion in schools and educational institutions. Despite negatively affecting

the educational opportunities for girls, this issue is absent from school education and teacher education programmes. Since teachers' training institutes initiate the trainee teachers, both male and female, into this culture of silence, they too carry forward this culture as teachers themselves.

I wanted to normalise the conversation around menstruation so that new menstruators grow up with a 'positive self' image, and not with the feeling that their body is a source of impurity or uncleanness because of menstruation. A recent study revealed that only four education boards in India have lessons on menstruation in their textbooks, and only two out of these have sections on misconceptions related to menstruation (Kushwaha & Maurya, 2017). Students participating in the study informed that both male and female teachers hesitate to teach the lesson on menstruation even though it is in their textbook. Teachers tell students to read this lesson at home on their own. I realised that the situation demands that we prepare teachers who talk openly on the subject of menstruation and become a source of support for their young students in the future.

I try not to provide menstrual products in a secretive way. For example, I tell students that they should not whisper but ask aloud for sanitary pads when in need. Further, I deliberately ask male researchers, if they are present in my class, to hand over the sanitary pads. The teacher trainees of my class, both male and female, openly discuss issues related to menstruation and are certain that they will be able to talk with and support their young students on issues of menstruation in the future.

By sharing some of my experiences, I have tried to articulate the strategies or efforts of adopting inclusive practices in teachers' education. These I hope will help future teachers, both male and female, to take forward such discussions in their classrooms and schools. Students now have a better understanding of inclusion, and their interaction with the content, their empirical writings, and their understanding shows promise for the future. It assures us that they will surely pass on their inclusive understanding and enthusiasm to their communities and their future workplaces.

Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal

References

National Education Policy, 2020. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

Kushwaha, M & Maurya, A (2017) Textbook and Menstruation. International Refereed Journal of Reviews and Research. Vol. 5, Issue 5, September 2017. <https://www.irjrr.com/research/index.php/vol-5-issue-5-september-2017>



Madhu Kushwaha has been working at the Faculty of Education of Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, for 25 years. The social context of education and gender issues in education form the core of her teaching and research.

Contact: mts.kushwaha@gmail.com