Inclusive Education:
Challenges in Building a Coherent Understanding

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As an instructor teaching a course on Inclusive Education in a Masters' in Education programme for the past six years now, year after year, I have to deal with a fair degree of scepticism from my students. Having been exposed to the realities of the public education system as part of their curriculum, the students are well versed with the constraints within which a majority of the schools in India operate. By now, they have seen enough poorly resourced classrooms, met teachers with little training and no motivation to engage and interacted with children with low learning levels struggling to make meaning of a rigid curriculum that is far removed from their immediate contexts.

Hence, when I introduce the *idea* of inclusive education to them and evoke pertinent legislation and policy documents and debates in human rights and social justice to garner support for its implementation, they view my propositions with reservation and ask a host of difficult questions about realising these ideals in practice. As I struggle to keep a brave face in front of my students and make a convincing case for it, I am faced with another kind of problem. I am unable to provide for them a coherent, unambiguous understanding of the concept of Inclusive Education in the Indian context, which could provide a framework of clear guidelines and recommendations for its implementation. The majority of the references and readings that I use in the class to teach originate in the Western world where Inclusive Education as a concept and practice has not only been part of the education discourse for many more years, but its origins and practice have a very different historical context from ours.

Hence, the pedagogic challenge that I face in my classroom is not only with respect to providing convincing, feasible solutions to implement the ideals of Inclusive Education in the public education system in India, but also to help my students answer a few innocuous questions, such as: *What is Inclusive Education? Who is it meant for? How can it be realised in practice?*

In this article, I will elaborate upon some of the conceptual issues involved in arriving at a consistent understanding of Inclusive Education and why it is pertinent to construct this understanding grounded in the pragmatic considerations of the social, cultural and contextual factors within which the public education system in the country is embedded. And finally, I suggest how scholarship in Inclusive Education can be generated from the ground by involving those integrally involved in its practice.

Interrogating the nature of Inclusive Education

The struggle to find academically and empirically sound sources so far for reference on Inclusive Education in the Indian context occurs at multiple levels. One, Inclusive Education as a phenomenon became popular in India only recently, after its quiet appearance in policy documents in the late nineties. Hence, there is only a scant body of scholarship that has so far been published and is accessible in the public domain. Two, the empirical research base in Inclusive Education generated in the past two decades or so is limited in both scope and quality (Lindsay, 2007; Rose, 2017; Singal, 2006). Three, representations of the concept in the policy documents are fraught with misinterpretations and ambiguity, allowing only a nebulous conceptual understanding of the phenomenon to evolve. Moreover, Inclusive Education is still not considered as an integral part of the mainstream education discourse in the country. Hence, its peripheral positioning has prevented it from being recognised as making any discernible contribution to scholarship in the domain of education studies in India.

However, while these are specific issues related to building scholarship on Inclusive Education in India, even in Western contexts, where the concept has received much greater attention, Inclusive Education has always been fraught with multiple interpretations and has remained a contested notion. Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) use the adage *'inclusion means different things to different people,'* to drive home the point. The authors further contend that inclusion is better

known by what it is not rather than what it is, illustrating its complex nature.

While several attempts at arriving at a coherent definition of Inclusive Education have been made, academic scholars and practitioners point to inherent difficulties in reaching a consensus. A major difficulty lies in the divide between viewing Inclusive Education from the perspective of what it was originally meant to be and what it has come to be. Tracing its origins, Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) recall that Inclusive Education arose as a response and challenge to the restrictions to access and participation that practices of mainstreaming and integration posed. The movement, steered by parents, teachers and disability activists envisaged the *role of schools in creating democratic and inclusive societies.* However, in practice, there is no clear set of principles that guides its implementation and Inclusive Education has been reduced to mere rhetoric which embraces some 'feel good' aspects of the inclusive discourse without any serious engagement with the original guiding principles. Hence, definitions of Inclusive Education vary based on descriptions of actual practices versus prescriptions of what ought to be (Ainscow, et. al., 2006).

A similar problem lies in some definitions being either too narrow or too broad, or even fragmented, on the basis of the group of students for whom inclusive education is meant.

Definitional debates apart, authors like Graham and Slee (2007) raise some fundamental questions that they hope educators and practitioners of Inclusive Education would try and answer as they interrogate the nature of Inclusive Education and its practice. In a powerful critique triggered by an examination of existing practices in Australia, the authors raise the following questions: what is meant by talk of inclusion, how this may differ from being inclusive, and whose interests may be served by practices that seek to include?

As one reflects on these questions, it becomes amply clear that the tenuous understanding of Inclusive Education arises from the tension that exists between its ideological and conceptual construction versus its realisation in practice. As Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) point out, after answering the question, *inclusion for whom, into what and for what purpose, one must also ask, what constitutes inclusive practice?* since the desirable (the ideological) may be different from the achievable (practice).

Inclusive Education in policy

As one struggles to overcome this dichotomy, another dimension that adds further complexity to the issue is the representation of Inclusive Education in policy documents. This dimension becomes particularly pertinent in the Indian context. In India, the term *Inclusive Education* began to find mention in policy documents and schemes, such as the PIED, DPEP, PWD in the nineties and the SSA (2000). Much impetus for this was provided by the Salamanca Statement in 1994 in Spain to which India was a signatory (Chowdhury, 2011). However, in India, Inclusive Education appeared to be a concept that had been borrowed from the West mainly for its feel-good, child-centred, and 'romantic appeal' (Singal, 2005; Sharma, 2010; Alur, 2007). Singal (2006) contend that in India Inclusive Education as a phenomenon has not been adequately engaged with. She elaborates further that, in several policy documents as well as in early writings on inclusion, the terms *integration* and *inclusion* were used alternately, causing much ambiguity and giving scope for misinterpretation.

In addition to this, even in the schemes launched at the time, a dual approach was adopted wherein, while the education of children with disabilities was professed in regular schools, special schools too continued to be promoted. In fact, Inclusive Education was seen only one among several alternatives available for the education of children with disabilities and not as a way of bringing about school reform (Lindsay, 2007). Hence, with policy documents providing only ambiguous notions of inclusive education, fairly elemental questions like, *what is inclusive education or what comprises inclusive practices*, do not seem to have easy answers.

As one examines these issues, a larger question may be raised: *What then are legitimate sources of knowledge that may contribute to an understanding of Inclusive Education?*

Situating scholarship in relevant contexts

As stated in an earlier part of this article, in India, Inclusive Education appears to be a phenomenon that was borrowed from the West without adequate critical engagement with the concept (Singal, 2006). This led to several critical aspects of

its origin, purpose and application getting ignored and allowing only a fragmented understanding of it to evolve, leaving room for multiple interpretations and representations.

As we go forward, it is essential that any scholarship that develops in the domain takes into account the unique historical, economic, social and cultural diversity of India as well as the nature of its complex educational landscape. Several scholars corroborate this stance (Lindsay, 2007; Rao, 2001; Rose, 2017; Singal, 2006). I substantiate the view with a few illustrations.

Tracing the origin

Tracing the origins of inclusion in the western world, Rao (2011) explains that traditionally in the developed world, children with disabilities were admitted into special schools. As the social model of disability evolved, inclusion came to be seen as a means of overcoming the barriers of segregation and achieving deinstitutionalisation. With equity and social justice as guiding principles, inclusion became a symbol of school reform. However, in countries like India, where special schools were never a norm, *institutional segregation could not be used as a sound rationale for Inclusive Education*.

For the same reason, an economic argument that pitches Inclusive Education as an inevitability in India, since India cannot afford to build parallel systems of education, is not a very sound one either. Rao warns against inclusion becoming another 'trend' much like special education practices, that is simply transferred from the West. It appears that the very premises on which Inclusive Education gained ground in the western society may not provide such a sound rationale for us. Hence, if we embrace inclusion, the justification for it must also originate from motives which are embedded in our historical and socioeconomic milieu.

Similarly, in order to develop an understanding of Inclusive Education, it is extremely important to understand issues related to the situation of children with disabilities in India from historical, as well as sociocultural, perspectives. The unique diversity accorded in India to caste, class and religious differences is a complex context within which Inclusive Education must be envisaged and practised. I will briefly mention a few aspects to illustrate my point.

Disability in India

Ghai (2015) states that there is no unified definition of disability in India. She believes that in order to comprehend the meaning of disability in the Indian context and the cultural background which is rooted in strong mythological and religious beliefs that provide varied and complex meanings to notions of disability and disabled people as being *evil, flawed* or possessing *supernatural abilities*. Also, due to lack of systematic research of the historical perspectives, contemporary constructions portray disabled people as possessing negative identities due to the predominance of the medical model, where the identity of a disabled person is reduced only to its condition and the 'deficits' therein. (Ghai, 2001). She further laments the marginalisation of people with disability from society:

'Their lives remain mired in vicious patterns of helpless cynicism, political inertia and poor social innovations that offer no long-term solution'.

An important aspect of disability that cannot be ignored in the Indian context is its very close linkage with poverty. Poverty being the biggest cause of impairment in developing countries like India, its impact on the lives of the disabled and their families causes both structural and attitudinal barriers leading to feelings of extreme powerlessness and vulnerability (Ghai, 2001). Disadvantages that poverty, gender, caste and the rural-urban divide bring to disability are further exacerbated by stigma and labelling. This leads to complications like arriving at an accurate assessment of the number of people with disability in the country. Added to that are the problems of using multiple categories and inconsistent terminology to denote different types of disabilities. Consideration of all these factors should be primary in any credible discussion on the education of children with disabilities in India.

The education landscape

India's education system is layered with diversity and vastness. With the largest number of school-aged children in the world, the scale of the elementary education system in India is huge and perhaps hard to imagine for policy-makers and planners around the world (Little, 2010 as cited in Singal, 2014). With impetus from several important policy and legislative markers in recent years, (such as the SSA, 2001 and RTE, 2009) India has been able to achieve tremendous success in enrolling nearly 98 percent of its children in school (UNICEF, 2015). However, issues of retention, allocation and distribution of adequate resources, teacher education and, most importantly, quality of education continue to be causes for concern.

Caste and gender emerge as important dimensions of exclusion, with children from the lower castes and the girl child being at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Singal, 2014). The struggle to retain children in the public education system as opposed to the rising popularity of low fee-paying, poor-quality private schools is another systemic challenge that has come to hound the Indian education scenario. Data available on children with disabilities attending schools is highly contradictory and discrepant. According to a recent report by UNESCO and TISS (2019) there are approximately 7.8 million children with disability under the age of 19 in India. Among them, three-fourths among five-year-olds and one fourth in the 5-19 age group do not attend any educational institution. Chances of children with disabilities dropping out of school are five times higher than children from other disadvantaged sections of the society, such as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Singal, 2014). In this scenario, ignoring the systemic challenges within the education system, or viewing Inclusive Education from the narrow perspective of children with disabilities alone, is only going to prove counterproductive. The country can neither achieve its goal of education for all with this short-sighted view nor can the education of children with disabilities be envisaged as being meaningful and empowering. Recognising all these factors is of utmost importance for any idea of Inclusive Education in the country.

Constructing scholarship in Inclusive Education

My submission is that the belief systems and extreme marginalisation due to stigma and poverty that majority of people with disability face in India and the diverse and complex nature of the Indian education system form the ecological framework within which the nature of Inclusive Education must be constructed.

Further, such scholarship that evolves from the ground can be generated only when researchers and practitioners both come together and work as collaborators to construct knowledge about inclusive practice that is close to the real-life experiences of those involved in it. This knowledge could then contribute at various levels of informing policy-makers, administrators, parents and teachers in developing a shared understanding of Inclusive Education that takes into account the voices of those who matter. Specifically, such studies could focus on the ideological shifts and attitudinal changes that enable schools to adopt inclusion in principle and practice, how exclusionary barriers to learning are removed, how teachers and other stakeholders are continually prepared to work with children with diverse learning needs, how collaboration among the stakeholders is sought and how issues of governance, finances and rigidity of the curriculum and assessment are dealt with (Madan, 2018).

The challenge of providing convincing answers to students' incisive questions will continue to remain until enough examples of good practices in inclusive education emerge to demonstrate how against all odds, the goals of inclusive education can be realised. Meanwhile, it is essential that researchers, teachers, administrators, policy planners and academics join hands to form a coherent understanding of inclusive education which is embedded in its sociocultural context, is informed by practice and, in turn, contributes to its realisation.

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