



Inclusive education: the way ahead

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In spite of the term “Inclusive Education” being more or less accepted globally, there seem to be some differences in the way the term “inclusion” is interpreted and practiced. The concept of inclusive education has emerged as a global movement to challenge exclusionary policies and practices and has become an effective approach to address the learning needs of ALL students in mainstream schools. In short, ‘inclusion’ refers to the opportunity for persons with a disability to participate fully in all of the educational, employment, consumer, recreational, community and domestic activities that typify everyday society. This includes the intellectually disabled as well. The quest for an acceptable lifestyle for persons with intellectual disabilities in particular, has passed many milestones such as the UNCRPD, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The whole strategy of meeting the educational needs of children with intellectual disabilities has changed drastically in the last decade and India is trying to keep pace with international developments. However we must realise that importing what works in the West is not the way forward for us. The practice hitherto has resulted in separate special education systems resulting in social segregation and isolation. We create separate worlds right from the start of a child’s life, for the earliest social impact on a child is the first year of school. Inclusive education on the contrary can lay the foundation for a more inclusive society where being “different” is

accepted and valued as part of humanity and its myriad forms. So, the fundamental argument for inclusive education is not only educational. There are solid social and moral arguments for it. We must also be aware of the perils of exclusion and its long range impact.

So, how should we go about implementing the inclusion aspect into our present educational system? Some situations exist which must be faced and addressed. Firstly, we must realise that inclusive education does not stop at the school gates. It goes beyond to other opportunities for training, employment, and options to choose the most suitable kind of life style. It means enabling even the intellectually disabled to make their own decisions particularly on aspects that will influence their lives. This translates into an aware community, which will include support from both the immediate family and the larger community. Second, we must also expect some reactions from parents of non-disabled children. There is much apprehension and misinterpretation about this. Finally, in India we have a different starting point since we do have a well established school system based on the western model of education.



Some major changes will have to be made. The major question is whether we have to demolish our existing system of education and reestablish roles and responsibilities. Obviously we cannot do this. Children with disabilities do need special teachers, special resources, special methodologies and sometimes special environments. These so-called 'special methods' are often no more than good child-focused teaching practices, which would even otherwise benefit all children, including those without disabilities. The focus should be on finding ways of creating the conditions that will accommodate pupil diversity and facilitate the learning of all children. The challenge here is not only to use the skills of special educationists but to find ways of helping teachers in regular schools to respond to diversity in the class room through interaction with special educators.

Research has shown that good teaching in general is based on child centered pedagogy and a stimulating educational environment. It is wrong to assume that so called special techniques can be provided by special teachers only. So, inclusion is not about making special education more inclusive but about making general education inclusive. Most skilled teachers are well aware of this and use their expertise to build on this fact. And it works best in a group that is heterogeneous – that is good, because, after all, life is heterogeneous. Available evidence from schools around the world where inclusive education is being practiced show that non disabled children do accept their disabled peers. Teachers of special education need not disappear. They will be needed to take on new responsibilities in mainstream schools to support work with children with disabilities. Their task will change, and supported by the special education professional, they will have to develop ways to cope, respond and make efforts to gain greater knowledge about disability per se. This may need modification of curriculum, reviewing of contents and teaching approaches and most of all, locating creative ways to respond to the diversity of children in the classroom. The classroom is rich



with learning opportunities as children learn through peer acceptance and support and this is where inclusion should begin.

In India, the disparity between elite educational institutions and their poorer counterparts are too glaring even to be mentioned. We must look also at the present situation in these schools. Classes where student teacher ratio is anywhere between 1: 40 and sometimes even more, definitely calls for an in-depth study before we can implement inclusion. Key elements of this should form part of the teacher training programmes but more importantly, greater emphasis should be given to in-service teacher training. Experience in other countries has shown that continuous school-based teacher training and development programmes involving the whole school are more relevant than one short training session. Techniques such as multilevel instruction and partial participation exist as well as basing educational planning on Howard Gardiner's theory of multiple intelligences. These have to be incorporated into our planning for inclusive education.

SAMADHAN's interpretation of inclusion stems from its early experience and gained momentum when inclusion became a focus for both government and educational institutions. Admitting a child without disability into our Special Education Unit was easy but admitting a child with intellectual disability in a local mainstream school was difficult. So though we continued admitting non-disabled and disabled children into our Special Education Unit we worked on making children with intellectual disability reach an academic level where they would fit into a mainstream school. So our strategy for admission of our children with

intellectual disability in mainstream schools focused on three things: to minimise and remove the negative perceptions of the community in general about inclusive education, the lack of knowledge of both Heads and teachers in mainstream schools and most importantly the attitudes of parents of non-disabled children who were unwilling to have their children “sit next to” a child with intellectual disability. Coupled with this was the lack of disability-friendly buildings, play grounds, toilets (especially for girls) and in general the complete lack of any supportive infrastructure for the intellectual or any other category of disability.

A survey of identified colonies in our low socio-economic colonies to gauge the status of awareness and knowledge of inclusive practices in the local schools helped in launching several strategically planned interventions. A workshop of local mainstream school teachers documented their views on inclusive education, readiness to accept such in their schools, awareness of policies and laws made by the government, their own attitudes and what “inclusion” should be. The results were revealing and helped in formulating regular need-based workshops on the inclusion concept in local mainstream schools.

The positive outcome was that from the teachers and parents we had met and talked to, we were

able to establish a facilitator's support group. After an initial training and compulsory attendance at workshops they formed a core group of advocates who shared the message of inclusion in the community. Simultaneously, we continued an open discussion forum to share the benefits of inclusion with a variety of groups. Sensitising the community at large on inclusive was undertaken through puppet theatre, nukkadnatak, informal talks and health camps.

A survey covered 91 schools and established positive partnerships with mainstream schools who admit intellectually disabled children who pass out from our special education unit. We have admitted 16 children between the ages of 5 plus to 10 years of age into the Primary Schools of the MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi)

In reiteration, inclusion is NOT just children with disabilities being “allowed to go” to school. It is NOT just a goal. It is a process. It is NOT about creating parallel education systems or individual entitlements and it is most certainly NOT “fitting” into the currently existing education system. Inclusive education is flexible, where emphasis is on learning and not on teaching. Our SAMADHAN initiative shows that inclusive education can be implemented. Most of all it is equalisation of educational opportunities for ALL children.

References

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Pramila is the Founder and presently the Mentor of SAMADHAN, an NGO established in 1981, with focus on children with intellectual disability also impacted by poverty. Two centers in New Delhi provide early identification and intervention, therapy, inclusive education and income generating skills to the mothers of the children. She won the award for innovation from the World Bank for linking disability, poverty and womens' empowerment and from The Inclusion International for involving community and using local resources. She can be contacted at lila.bala@gmail.com

