Research Article

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ARE FINDING A WAY THROUGH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION- A STUDY

Arnab Chowdhury and Jayanta Mete

Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Historically, attempts towards development and ensuring equality and justice for all have been done to conform to the norms and systems of the society. Quality basic education is a fundamental human right. However, many continue to be denied this right and the opportunity to enjoy its many benefits because of limited access to the participation in the education system. Through inclusive education, one can respond to the diversity of needs of all learners and thereby reducing exclusion to and within education system. Hence, inclusive education is a means to achieve fundamental right to education for all. The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Spain in 1994, and was reaffirmed at the World Education Forum, the challenge of getting all children into school has been put on the political agenda in many countries and is reflected in the Right to Education Bill in India also. This paper will attempt to analyze the origin, concept and practices of inclusive education; also it focuses on a critical element of the inclusive education as a challenge towards achievement of equity for students with disabilities. It will also explain the nature of barriers will be confronted to inclusive education and suggest the approach for successful its implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive schools are designed with a vision and principle that believe in the culture of rights, social justice and equity. It believes that all children are not the same, and accepts diversity as strength rather than a problem. It believes in certain basic pedagogy that children learn in different ways, and relates success more with the learning of life and social skills than scoring high marks in exams. The admission policy of such schools would accept children from a diverse community rather than reject on the ground of admission test scores or other physical, social and economic factors. Inclusive schools follow flexible curricula that would respond to the diverse needs of children. Child-centered pedagogy and application of Gardner"s (1993) Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory are other major departure from the traditional schools that inclusive schools would follow. The UNESCO Framework has again highlighted the need of child-centered pedagogy for addressing the educational needs of the disadvantaged and the disabled: The challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child –centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities.

Corresponding author: **Arnab Chowdhury**
Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

Schools encouraging the identification and application of these intelligences would be able to remove unseen and internal barriers that children face in traditional schools. Inclusive schools use variety of innovative practices to get children involved and participating in learning processes. Some of the inclusion strategies are listed as under.

- Whole class inclusive teaching
- Group/cooperative/collaborative learning
- Peer tutoring/child-to-child learning
- Activity based learning
- Team approach/problem solving
- Equity in assessment/examinations

Meaning of Inclusive Education: The discussion on inclusive education started with proposal of the social model of disability, which proposes systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) as the ultimate factors defining disability. This shift in the idea came when it was realized that children in special schools were seen as geographically and socially segregated from their peers and failure of meaningfully integrating students in mainstream schools (integration). Inclusive education is not only limited to mainstreaming the learners with special needs but also concerned with identifying and overcoming all barriers to effective, continuous and quality participation in education.

Barriers and Suggestions for Implementing Inclusive Education

While we cannot neglect the importance of inclusive education it remains unanswered why the practice of inclusive education is presenting problems. It appears that it is both at the level of government policy but rather at the level of implementation. While the policy states that all children should go to school – and governments are enforcing this rule – in many cases quality learning is not taking place, which is contradictory to the ethos of inclusive education. The reasons for the non implementation of the inclusive education in India, is because of various barriers which according to Johan (2002) are both external and as well as internal. The external barriers are confronted before coming to and getting enrolled in schools, which includes physical location of schools, non-availability of school, social stigmatization or economic conditions of the learners.

The internal barriers are mostly psychological barriers like self concept, confidence etc which are sometimes imposed by the external factors and first step to remove the internal barriers is to remove the external barriers. The following are some of the external barriers.

Attitudinal Barriers: It has been noted that disabled students suffer from physical bullying, or emotional bullying. These negative attitudes results in social discrimination and thus leads to isolation, which produces barriers to inclusion. Regarding disabled children some regions still maintain established beliefs that educating the disabled is pointless. It is sad to note here that these barriers are caused by society, which is more serious to any particular medical impairment. The isolation which results from exclusion closes the doors of real learning. The negative attitudes often develop due to lack of knowledge. Along with information about disability or condition, their requirements must be provided to peers, school staff and teachers as well. Increasing interactions between learners with special needs and community through organization of fairs, meetings etc.

Physical barriers: Along with the attitudinal barriers which are faced by the learners on the daily basis, another important barrier is the physical barriers, which includes school buildings, playgrounds, washrooms, library etc. Apart from this, the majority of schools are physically inaccessible to many learners because of poor buildings, particularly rural areas. Since most schools are not equipped to respond to special needs, poses blockage for learners in physically getting into school. For example, many of the students require a personal assistant for such basic activities as taking lunch in recess, personal care, remedial education efforts. Most school buildings don't respond to the requirement of these learners properly. For example, if there is a ramp, sometimes it is too steep, often the doors were too heavy for the student to open unaided which impedes the access.

Inappropriate Curriculum as a barrier: In any education system, the curriculum is one of the major obstacles or tools to facilitate the development of more inclusive system. Curriculum includes the broad aims of education and has its implications on transactional and evaluation strategies. In our country of diversity, curriculum is designed centrally, hence which leaves little flexibility for local adaptations or for teachers to experiment and try out new approaches. This results in making the content inaccessible and demotivating.

Therefore, the design and development of specific learning and teaching materials and teaching arrangements should take cognizance the needs, interest, aspirations and uniqueness of the learners. Elliot (2002) reports on changes being attempted in American schools where students „learn social skills and group work in environment that celebrates diversity." In the inclusive settings, assessment of learners must be against the broad aims of curriculum and education and also must be evaluated against their own achievements rather to be compared by others, which will be truly individualized. Also, it is suggested that the assessment has to be continuous, based on the feedback of both learners and the teachers.

Untrained Teachers as Barrier: For implementing the inclusive education successfully, it is important that teachers must have positive attitudes towards learners with special needs. But, because of lack of knowledge, education, understanding, or effort the teachers give inappropriate substitute work to the learners, which eventually leads to learners dissatisfaction and poor quality of learning. Another important feature of the schools is high teacher–student ratios (average 1:45) and where it is expected that learners of diverse abilities have to be taught together. At the first place, there is a scarcity of trained teachers to deal with the diversity and secondly, it is very wrong to assume to deal with 45 learners with diversity. Hence, it is important to reduce the teacher-learner's ratio in the classroom, which is only possible if we have more schools with trained teachers to deal with the diversity of learners.

Organization of the Education System: In our country, there are different types of schools such as private, government; public schools are developing inequality by offering differential levels of facilities and support. Those having an access to private schools have higher possibility of success as compared to those who go to government schools. Therefore, it is important like many developed countries, the common school system policy must be place properly. There is also a lack of information within many systems and often there is not an accurate picture of the number of learners excluded from the school system. Very often this leads to a situation where these learners do not have equal opportunities for further education or employment.

Sollusitions for Inclusive Education

Quality with Equity: There is one more dimension to the inclusion concept. It addresses the issue of quality in consonance with equity. In traditional style of schooling quality and excellence are divorced from equity. The institution of the school as a public system for mass education has its origin in the industrial era. It grew on the production line factory model in a period when democracy was yet to flower fully; elitism, hierarchy and even feudalism guided the social and economic fabrics of the society and its institutions. School was not an exception. It borrowed not only vocabularies from the industries, such as products, performance, standard test etc., but also its ethos. Admittedly, now we are in the 21st century, and in the information age. Hence, it calls for a re-look at the institution of school. Skrtic (1991), Lipsky and Gartner (1999) and Llyod (2000) have questioned the adequacy, relevance and appropriateness" of the public education system that was shaped and influenced by the needs of the industrial era.

Open education: Open education is characterized by the removal of restrictions, exclusions and privileges (Richardson, 2000). It provides an alternative curricular route to students who are not able to cope with the rigid curriculum and fixed timeframe of the traditional school system. To many students and parents, however, it is regarded as a secondary choice, considered after they have not been able to access or secure „success" in the existing regular school system. It is considered as a non-contact educational delivery system, though its interactive learning materials are more learner friendly than the textbooks as the sole means of learning in many schools. The growth of information and communication technology in recent years and its application in education is reducing the distance between open education system and „not-open" system. Children in regular schools are accessing information with the help of modern educational technology and the Internet. They are becoming active partners in knowledge production, as they would do in the open system. Teachers are changing their role and are becoming facilitators. Schools are becoming learning places for dialogues and exchanges. Inclusive education in its philosophy as also in practice is closer to the open education system.

Case examples: Two schools in India have been studied closely as examples. They have addressed the issues of equity and quality simultaneously and are close to the concept of inclusive schooling, though they remain within the confines of the school boards. Loreto Day School, Sealdah (Kolkata) is affiliated with WBBSE, but is not like many other private or partially aided schools in the country. In 1977, it had 93 poor and non-fee paying students out of a total of 791 on its roll. In 1999, the school roll had 1500 students, and 750 were non-fee paying. These students are subsidized by the fee-paying students, sponsors and donors and by the West Bengal government for the dearness allowance as they give to other registered private schools. This increase in percentage of non-fee paying students is not just a numerical or mechanical exercise aimed to open access to these students by an established reputed school. It flows from a vision and value system that school has created for itself. Its other programmes include the Rainbow School for street children, which is not a tag on afternoon programme to take care of equity, but is a structured and integral programme of curriculum development and child-to-child teaching and learning. The street children are individually tutored by regular pupils from class V to X as a part of their work experience time slot.

Community

Loreto challenges a fixed view of school and its structure by seeking to live out a set of values which continually challenges parents, teachers and pupils of the school to build an outward looking community, to be flexible, and to live in simplicity. The school has also maintained the conventional academic performance by its students, 60% scoring first class annually at XII class public exam conducted by the school board. Loreto has succeeded in breaking the conventional mindset that creates barriers to access by poor students as also the very concept of quality and success. „ There are lessons for all schools, worldwide, rich and poor, in the boundary breaking strategies which Loreto has adopted to maximize its resources". (Source: Jessop, 1998).

The priority in admission is given to neighborhood students and all children learn together in the same classroom. The school's teachers evolve variety of teaching methodologies to actively involve children in learning activities. But, in the absence of a vision and orientation, children get isolated and many times they are segregated in separate units or even if in the same class they do not feel included. The concept inclusion, though initiated in the background of education of children with disabilities and special needs, goes beyond special school, particularly when one thinks of children in developing countries. It takes into its fold the vulnerable and the children at risk, for whom access is not just a question of physical availability of space in schools and services of teachers and success does not mean only passing public examinations.

CONCLUSION

Disability is seen as a developmental issue in any economy, as the disabled group is often being marginalized due exclusion from the society and thus leading to poverty. Inclusive Education approach doesn"t only provide the basic human right to education but also dignity which is often being linked with the socio economic status. It is seen as a device for both access and quality education which are also fundamental aspirations of EFA and MDG action frameworks. Through, inclusive education the learners gets a chance for not only getting into the system but also a support to complete it successfully. Inclusive education results in improved social development and academic outcomes for all learners as it provides opportunity to get exposed to the real world which leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions. It also provides platform to the non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes, tolerance. An important prerequisite for inclusive education is have respect for differences, respect for different learning styles, variations in methods, open and flexible curricula and welcoming each and every learner. Apart from that, very importantly there is a need to change the negative attitudes and more responsibility towards learners with special needs, which can be brought about by policy changes. There is a need to provide proper training to the teachers dealing with the diverse needs of the learners, applying appropriate individualized pedagogy and assessment system. Also, this training must be continuous. Barriers to access and success can be viewed in physical as well as structural sense. But more than that, it is the curriculum, the pedagogy, the examination and the school's approach, which create barriers. Unless these unseen barriers are taken care of, access to all children and an assurance of success to all would remain a far cry. The inclusive education movement, combined with technological development and a new approach to open schooling has come at this crucial juncture. Countries and school systems choosing a holistic approach to access and success are more likely to succeed in reaching education for all.

References

Ainscow, M. (1999) Understanding the development of inclusive schools. London: Falmer Beech, H (2002) School Daze. Time, April 15, 2002, Vol.159, No.14

Booth, T., Ainscow, M. and Dyson, A. (1998) „ England: inclusion and exclusion in a competitive system" in Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. (eds.) From Them to Us: An international study of inclusion in education. London: Routledge Clough, P. and Corbett, J. (2000) Theories of

Inclusive Education: A Student‟s Guide London: Paul Chapman.

Elliott, M (2002) Test Scores Don‟t Say It All. Time, April 15, 2002, Vol.159, No.14 Ferguson, D.L. (1996) „Is it inclusion yet? Bursting the bubbles‟ in Berres, M.S., Ferguson, D.L., Knoblock, P. and Woods, C. (eds.) Creating To-morrow‟s Schools Today: Stories of Inclusion, Change, and Renewal. New York: Teacher College Press.

Galloway, D., Armstrong, D. and Tomlinson S. (1994) The assessment of special educational needs: whose problem?

London: Longman Gardner, H. (1993) Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence London: Fontana Press

Jessop, T (1998) A Model for Best Practice at Loreto Day School, Sealdah, Calcutta Education Sector Group: DfID (India)

Jha, M.M. (2002) School without Walls: Inclusive Education for All. Oxford: Heinemann 8. Lipsky, D.K. and Gartner, A. (1999)„ Inclusive education: a requirement of a democratic society‟ in Daniels, H. and Garner, P. (eds) World Yearbook of Education 1999: Inclusive Education. London: Kogan Page.

Llyod, C. (2000) „ Excellence for all children-false promises! The failure of current Policy for education and implications for schooling in the 21st century‟ in *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.Vol.4, No.2, and April-June 2000 London: Taylor and Francis.

Mittler, P. (2000) Working towards inclusive education: Social context. London: Fulton Richardson, J.T.E. (2000) Researching student learning: Approaches to studying in campus based and distance education. Buckingham: Open University Press

Sebba, J. and Ainscow, M. (1996)„ International development in inclusive schooling: Mapping the issues‟ in *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Vol.26 (1) (p.5-18) Skrtic, T.M. (1991) Behind Special Education: A Critical Analysis of Professional culture and School Organization. Denver (Colorado): Love Publishing

****