INCLUSION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

It is now widely accepted that children with special needs should be educated along with their peers and be treated as equal and vital members of society. Today there are millions of children and youth in India who have remained marginalized because they are 'disabled'. They remain hidden as a result of the stigmatizing attitudes and negative value dispositions of the community members.   Inclusive education, as an approach, seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. It implies all learners, young people - with or without disabilities being able to learn together through access to common pre-school provisions, schools and community educational setting with an appropriate network of support services. This is possible only in a flexible education system that assimilates the needs of a diverse range of learners and adapts itself to meet these needs. Inclusion leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions because learners are exposed to real environment in which they have to interact with other learners each one having unique characteristics, interests and abilities.   The non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes and actions towards learners with disabilities as a result of studying together in an inclusive classroom. Children and youth with disabilities have fallen victims to an education system that is rigid and not able to meet their individual needs. They need special teaching and sometimes different educational facilities from those that schools generally provide for children of the same age. If it is firmly believed that all children can learn and most of them can be included into regular education, there is a need to create a regular class environment that nurtures acceptance of diversity and promotes friendships based on reciprocity and mutual respect. While recognizing that there are no simple answers, this paper attempts to give an overview of the concept of inclusion and offers a set of recommendations that can help to ensure to meet the needs of all students.

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities, especially children and the young, continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in all societies. Their discernible limitations apart, they are subjected to social discrimination, very limited work opportunities and, above all, impoverished educational rights and experiences. Though service to disabled children in India is more than 100 years old, the coverage of these children in the formal school system is not even 5 per cent belonging to the mainstream. Inclusive education is a human rights issue. Across the subcontinent 90 percent of India's estimated 40 million children aged 4-16 years with physical and mental disabilities are out of school. The overwhelming majority of them are vagabonds not out of volition but because callous school managements and over-anxious parents of abled children in a travesty of humanity and social justice have consistently discouraged them from entering the nation's classrooms. Social justice and equity which are dominant sentiments of the Constitution of India demand that India's 35 million physically disabled, if not the 5 million mentally challenged, children should be given preferential access into primary and secondary schools. Instead nine-tenths of them are systematically excluded.

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

There has been a considerable shift in the understanding of disability, from earlier medical interpretations of seeing disability as a deficit within the individual to that of viewing it in the context of a human rights issue.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 and the Programme of Action (1992) gives the basic policy framework for education, emphasizing the correcting of existing inequalities. It stresses on reducing dropout rates, improving learning achievements and expanding access to students who have not had an easy opportunity to be a part of the mainstream system. The NPE, 1986 envisaged measures for including the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence.

The 93rd Amendment of the Constitution of India has made education a fundamental human right for children in the 6-14 years age group thereby making it mandatory for all children to be brought under the fold of education. This includes children with disability.

India is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) that emphasizes access to quality education for all. The Statement endorses the need for fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach to inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs by implementing practical and strategic changes.

The Government of India has enacted the legislation Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (PWD Act) to achieve amongst other things, the goal of providing access to free education in an appropriate environment to all learners with disabilities till he/she attains the age of eighteen years. The Act endeavours to promote the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCERT, 2000) has recommended inclusive schools for learners with special educational needs by making appropriate modifications in the content, presentation and transaction strategies, preparing teachers and developing learning friendly evaluation procedures.

GOAL OF ACTION PLAN (2005) FOR INCLUSION

Recognizing Education for All children as a fundamental right, to ensure the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in all available mainstream educational settings, by providing them with a learning environment that is available, accessible, affordable and appropriate to help develop their learning and abilities.

Target Groups :

- Infants and children with special needs in the age group 0-6 yrs.
- Children with special needs in the age group 6-14yrs
- Young persons with disabilities in the age group 14 - to 21 yrs. who are part of the educational stream

Disability would refer to sensory, physical and intellectual impairments, communication, emotional and behavioral disorders, mental health difficulties and multiple disabilities. It would cover the disabilities as defined under the Persons with Disability Act (1995) and the National Trust Act (1999) :

- Blindness
- Low vision
- Leprosy cured
- Hearing impairments
- Locomotor disabilities
- Mental retardation
- Mental Illness
- Autism
- Cerebral Palsy
- Multiple disabilities

DR. SHARMISTA   3P a g e

In the 0-6 years, this may also cover all children indicating developmental delay, low birth weight, termed at risk and medical problems that may lead to disabling conditions.

INCLUSION FOR THE DISABLED

Inclusion is the right to belong to the mainstream. It is a process of increasing the participation of all students in school, including those with disabilities. It is about restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality. It refers to an education system that accommodates all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. The range of challenges confronting the school system while including children with diverse abilities and from diverse backgrounds have to be met by creating a child centred pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children. An inclusive class may have amongst others, children who are disabled or gifted, street or working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children belonging to ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities or children from other disadvantaged or marginalized groups. Inclusion enables pupils to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities. An early start in mainstream playgroups or nursery schools, followed by education in ordinary schools and colleges, is the best preparation for an integrated life. Inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Proponents of inclusion generally favour newer forms of education service delivery.

Inclusion remains a controversial concept in education because it relates to educational and social values, as well as to our sense of individual worth. There are advocates on both sides of the issue. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) requires that children with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment appropriate" to meet their "unique needs." And the IDEA contemplates that the "least restrictive environment" analysis will begin with placement in the regular education classroom. Inclusion is a policy driven by an unrealistic expectation that money will be saved. Furthermore, trying to force all students into the inclusion mold is just as coercive and discriminatory as trying to force all students into the mold of a special education class or residential institution(Kauffman,1989). On the other side are those who believe that all students belong to the regular education classroom, and that "good" teachers are those who can meet the needs of all the students, regardless of what those needs may be. Between the two extremes are large groups of educators and parents who are confused by the concept itself. They wonder whether inclusion is legally required and what is best for children. They also question what it is that schools and school personnel must do to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Research

There are no comparative data available on special education students' academic gains, graduation rates, preparation for post-secondary schooling, work, or involvement in community living based on their placement in inclusive vs. non-inclusive settings. Therefore, an accurate comparison between separate programming and inclusive programming cannot be done.

The following is a brief review of a number of studies of various inclusive strategies. There are a number of reviews and meta-analyses that consistently report little or no benefit for students when they are placed in special education settings (Kavale, K.A., Glass, G.V., 1982; Madden and Slavin, 1983). However, in 50 studies comparing the academic performance of mainstreamed and segregated students with mild handicapping conditions, the mean academic performance of the integrated group was in the 80th percentile, while the segregated students score was in the 50th percentile (Weiner R., 1985).

Using this evidence, inclusion proponents claim that segregated programs are detrimental to students and do not meet the original goals for special education. Recent meta-analyses confirm a small to moderate beneficial effect of inclusive education on the academic and social outcome of special needs students. (Carlberg, C. and Kavale, K. 1980; Baker, E.T., and Wang, M.C., and Walberg, H.J., 1995).

Another study assessing the effectiveness of inclusion was done at Johns Hopkins University. In a school-wide restructuring program called Success For All, student achievement was measured. The program itself is a comprehensive effort that involves family support teams, professional development for teachers, reading, tutoring, special reading programs, eight-week reading assessments, and expanded opportunities for pre-school and kindergarten children. In assessing effectiveness, a control group was compared with the students in Success For All programs. Comparative measures included:

* Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery (1984)
* Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty (1980)
* Student retention and attendance.

Comparisons were made at first, second, and third grades. Students identified with exceptional education needs were included in all comparisons. While assessments showed improved reading performance for all students, the most dramatic improvements occurred among the lowest achievers. In spite of the fact that these inner city schools have normally high retention problems, only 4% of the fourth graders in the experimental group had ever

been held back one or more grades, while the five control schools had 31% who had failed at least one year.

The primary importance of research on Success For All is that it demonstrated that with early and continuing intervention nearly all children could be successful in reading. Common practice in compensatory and special education was to identify children who had already fallen behind and provide remediation services that last for years (Allington and McGill-Frazen, 1990). Research on Success For All and other intensive early intervention programs such as Reading Recovery (Pinnell, 1991) and Prevention of Learning Disabilities (Silver and Hagen, 1989) suggested that there are effective alternatives to remedial approaches.

While researchers are cautious in their conclusions, there are some positive signs. In particular, students in special education and regular education showed several positive changes, including:

- A reduced fear of human differences accompanied by increased comfort and awareness (Peck et al., 1992);
- Growth in social cognition (Murray-Seegert,1989);
- Improvement in self-concept of non-disabled students (Peck et. al., 1992);
- Development of personal principles and ability to assume an advocacy role toward their peers and friends with disabilities;
- Warm and caring friendships (Bogdan and Taylor, 1989).

The final issue shared by proponents of inclusion relates to cost-effectiveness. A 1989 study found that over a fifteen year period, the employment rate for high school graduates with special needs who had been in segregated programs was 53%. But for special needs graduates from integrated programs the employment rate was 73%. Furthermore, the cost of educating students in segregated programs was double that for educating them in integrated programs (Piuma, 1989). A similar study by Affleck, Madge, Adams, and Lowenbraun (1988) demonstrated that the integrated classroom for students with special needs was more cost-effective than the resource program, even though achievement in reading, math and language remained basically the same in the two service delivery models.

Discussion

It is apparent throughout the literature that the amount of time that children are pulled out of regular classrooms has become a concern. While in many cases pull-out is supported by the exceptional and regular education teachers and parents, there is mixed evidence of improved academic performance. Most groups and individuals believe that inclusion in the regular classroom is the appropriate starting point, and that a continuum of placement options and services must be available. One of the greatest challenges contributing to this debate is the

lack of similarity between the regular and special education systems that exist today (Wang, Reynolds and Walberg, 1988) (Elliott, Barbara, and Riddle, Margaret, 1992). Successful inclusion practices depend on restructured schools that allow for flexible learning environments, with flexible curricula and instruction. Under ideal conditions, all students work toward the same overall educational outcomes. What differs is the level at which these outcomes are achieved, the additional support that is needed by some students and the degree of emphasis placed on various outcomes. A restructured system that merges special and regular education must also employ practices that focus on high expectations for all and rejects the prescriptive teaching, remedial approach that leads to lower achievement (Guess and Thompson, 1989, Heshusius, 1988).

Recommendations

- Evolving a common acceptable definition and understanding of Inclusive Education
- Development of national norms for Inclusive Education, to set standards of implementation, training, monitoring and evaluation for the programme.
- Creating a database
- Recognizing the importance of early intervention in the first five years of life for skill development and learning, Early Childhood Care and Education sector should be seen as an entry point for education for children with special needs.
- Developing tools identifying quantitative and qualitative Indicators of Output that will determine success of interventions.
- Focus on time targeted enrollment of children and youth with disabilities and creating an enabling educational environment to support the inclusion process through review and adaptations in curricula, capacity building among various groups ranging from policy makers to education administrators, teachers and parents groups. Pre- service and in-service training of mainstream school/teachers with a prime focus with the disability component included in all teachers training programs.
- Build in a role for innovations within the Indian Context.
- Providing conducive and relevant learning environment by accepting the diversity of its client group and adapting to their individual needs.
- Existing support and delivery systems should be reviewed and strengthened. Providing physical access by removing architectural barriers in schools and assistance for transportation should be given priority. Removing attitudinal barriers through a range of mass awareness programmes is expected to give a further thrust to the enrollment programme by creating a demand from the parents' side.
- As the country moves towards the universalization of secondary education, the needs of young persons with disability should be included as part of the programme as it evolves. Current activities should aim towards ensuring resource and other support within the education system in order for those wishing to access secondary education.

DR. SHARMISTA

7 P a g e

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Counselling and resource support should be extended for those who to pursue vocational education at this level.

- Dovetailing/ convergence of current schemes, programmes for more efficient delivery
- Put in place mechanisms to ensure a system of regular feedback and monitoring.
- Identifying areas of current work needing strengthening and setting in place corrections.
- Access to availability of support services, aids and assistive devices, special educators, other rehab professionals.
- Appropriate Resource services support through appointment of special educators, rehab professionals, provision of resource room, etc to support mainstream school teachers in the classrooms.
- Put in place an effective communication and delivery system for specific delivery of teaching/ learning material, aids and appliances, hardware/ software.
- Participation in sports, co-curricular activities, to promote all round ability development.
- Support higher and vocational education through proper implementation of the existing 3% reservation quota in all educational institutions and creation of barrier free learning environments.
- Setting up of centres for disability studies and chair of disability studies in universities.
- Supporting research in areas related to inclusive practices
- Identifying issues requiring policy inputs.
- Setting in place procedures for policy review change if required.

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DR. SHARMISTA   8 P a g e

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DR. SHARMISTA   9P a g e

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DR. SHARMISTA   10P a g e

VOL 1, ISSUE 3   **www.puneresearch.com/world**   **Sept – Nov 2016**
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