

Do school teachers understand inclusion?

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Abstract

With the Government of India taking so many initiatives for the successful implementation of the inclusive education philosophy, it becomes necessary to explore how the teachers are perceiving the same. Teachers, being the most important agents of inclusion, need to have a clear knowledge and understanding of the inclusive education and its related terms for its successful implementation. In this regard, the paper discusses the results of a pilot study conducted by the researcher in the schools of Delhi to analyse the knowledge of the elementary school teachers on inclusive education.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive education, inclusive teaching strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is term that has been having several connotations. It has been one of the most debatable terms in the recent past whose meanings varied from integrating disabled children in the common classroom to providing an education system that is responsive to the needs of all the students present in the classroom, including those who are at the risk of marginalization. Inclusion is a state where all differences according to age, gender, ethnicity, language, health status, economic status, religion, disability, life-style and other forms of difference are acknowledged and respected. It is part of a wider strategy promoting inclusive development, with the goal of creating a world where there is peace, tolerance, sustainable use of resources and social justice; where the basic needs and rights of all are met. (Stubbs, 2008) [6]. It is about changing the system to fit the student, not changing the student to fit the system. It locates the 'problem' of exclusion firmly within the system, not the person or their characteristics (Stubbs, 2008) [6].

Thus inclusion is a philosophy that needs to be understood in order to create a cohesive environment where the needs of all the children are acknowledged, respected and fulfilled by the system that is fully capable of handling a variety of differences that may exist amongst the students.

2. Policy Initiatives for Inclusion

Several international declarations have time and again supported 'inclusive education' as an educational strategy for sustainable and equitable development of the country. The human Rights Declaration, 1948 declared education as a basic human right that must be bestowed in spite of all the odds. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, demanded that States to ensure "the elimination of any stereo typed concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education" and in particular, "by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods" (Stubbs, 2008) [6]. The inclusive education strategies were again stressed in the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the 'Education for All' conference held in Jometein in 2000.

India, being a signatory to all such major international commitments took initiative at the national level to adopt inclusion education as a philosophy and modify the education system for the betterment, by adopting better educational policies, with orientation towards inclusive education, better teacher training programmes to make the teachers understand the need of inclusive education in the country. The purpose of all such programmes was to prepare the educational system that is not just accessible to the children, but rather creates opportunities for the success of all the children. The programmes such as SSA [1] (2001), DPEP (1994), RTE [2] (2009) have been pioneer in this regard.

3. How do the Schools Respond to it?

With the implementation of the educational programmes such as SSA, RTE etc, there has been a major responsibility on the schools to provide quality education to all the children having access to it. The schemes such as SSA have ensured full enrolment by incentivising education for all including those who are at a risk of marginalization. SSA was a flagship programme for the implementation of the "education for all" framework.

Education became a right with the enforcement of the right based approach to education with the implementation of the Right to Education Act in 2010. Education became the right of the individual with the enforcement of this act making the system bound to provide quality education to all irrespective of their age, ability, class, caste etc. some important highlights of the RTE Act were as follows:

- *Schools as Inclusive Spaces:* A key RTE mandate is for schools to become inclusive spaces where all children

¹ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or SSA, is an Indian Government programme aimed at the universalisation of elementary education "in a time bound manner", as mandated by the 86th Amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 to 14 (estimated to be 205 million children in 2001) a fundamental right.

² The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act' or 'Right to Education Act also known as RTE', is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted on 4 August 2009, which describes the modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 in India under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution

from diverse backgrounds are welcomed, treated kindly, and encouraged to actively participate in learning through child-centred activities.

- *Teachers as key Change Agents:* Another important RTE goal is to empower teachers as key change agents in schools, ensuring their competence as professionals who are able to reflect on and improve their own practice.
- *Role of the Community:* RTE empowers communities to take ownership in the effective running of schools through School Management Committees.
- *Strengthened Institutions and Governance:* While there are one-time investments that will make a significant difference in raising targets in such areas as ensuring a library or a functional toilet in every school, much of the pedagogic transformation mandated by the RTE will necessitate substantial structural reform.

4. Do Teachers Understand Inclusion?

In the light of the national and international initiatives being taken up for inclusive education, it becomes mandatory for the schools to adopt the inclusive philosophy in their educational system. This requires skilled teachers who are capable of handling all kinds of student population entering the classrooms and using inclusive strategies for the success of all the students enrolled.

Skilling the teachers for inclusive education is the most important task to imbibe the inclusive approach in real terms. In this regard, a questionnaire exploring the knowledge and the understanding of the school teachers on inclusive education was administered by the researcher as a part of the pilot study on 50 elementary teachers chosen by the way of incidental sampling from the nearby schools of Delhi. The questionnaire consisted of 30 closed ended questions. Each question had 4 options to it but only one right answer. One mark was awarded to the teachers for each correct answer given by them. Thus the total maximum score that could be obtained was 30. It was observed that the mean score obtained was 23, which was quite appreciable. 21 teachers out of a total of 50 i.e. 42% had scored below the mean marks in the questionnaire whereas 29 teachers had scored above the mean marks. The wrong answers were then analysed to get an insight into the wrong concepts engrained in the teachers mind while conceptualizing inclusion. It was found that most of the teachers restricted the concept of inclusion still to 'disability' only. They still regarded diversity in the classrooms as a hindrance that needs to be overcome for successful learning.

The low scores of the teachers highlighted that a lot more efforts need to be put in for the in service training of the school teachers who actually will respond to the needs of the students at the grass root levels. Most of the teachers complained of the dearth of practical experiences in this regard and recommended field visits and intensive training programmes to improvise the same.

5. Conclusion

Successful implementation of the inclusive education depends upon the skills of the factors involved. Teachers, being the most important factors, affecting the success of inclusion, need to be trained for the efficient handling of the students and creating an encouraging and respectful environment for all the children irrespective of their age, abilities or family backgrounds.

6. References

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