Inclusive Education in India : A Road Map

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I nclusive education as an approach for addressing learning needs of all learners by addressing barriers is faced by particularly those with specific needs. It implies that *all learners*, young people - with or without different abilities 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. Inclusive education is thus, about achieving the basic human and civic rights of all, including those with physical, sensory, intellectual or situational impairments, through the creation of inclusive policies and practices at all levels of education systems, their values, knowledge systems and cultures, processes and structures. National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCERT, 2005) 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.

Exploring the Present Education System

In the light of this, it is important to examine and explore the practices and ideology that hinder or promote the creation of a more inclusive educational system. The current practice of focusing solely on the 3R's approach has led to education being viewed not as a process, but as a product: the tangible reward consisting of a report, marksheet, or degree at the end of the academic year. There is an urgent need to restructure the overall goals of the educational system so as not to lose sight of helping students to develop into contributing global citizens. When children fail to learn in schools, it is only too tempting to perceive something wrong within them. It is time that the education system does some introspection.

The challenge, given this interpretation of 'inclusive education', is that we have to create inclusive schools in which:

- Everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her.
- Peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met.

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A traditional classroom is one in which the adults make all decisions concerning lessons, the teaching activities by which the students are expected to learn, the assessments which tend to focus on paper and pencil tasks that are quick and easy to evaluate, and comply with. Often, the format is teacher lecture or student worksheets. The common metaphor for this type of classroom is that of the students as vessels that the teacher is to 'fill' with necessary knowledge. Inclusive classroom, on the other hand, is an environment, within which teachers and students provide support and guidance to the community of learners within the school and where teachers and students may explore curriculum while benefiting from contributions of various ability peers. Teachers who are inclusive are consistently moving away from rigid, textbook – and basal-driven frontal teaching toward & cooperative learning, whole language, thematic instruction, critical thinking, problem solving, and authentic assessment.

Diversity of needs is undoubtedly a challenge. But it is also an opportunity to enrich learning and social relations: a pedagogical challenge for the system and the institution, rather than an individual problem. To face up to this challenge means reforming systems and schools and restructuring classroom activity so that all learners can respond to opportunities and all teachers can construct them. If inclusive education is really to contribute to an accelerated achievement of Education For All, it is important that account be taken of the new demands, challenges,

difficulties, dilemmas and tensions that this change will imply.

Schools must be recognised as major arenas of social experience preparing young citizens of the world community. In this light, *inclusion* seems to be the obvious solution for creating a more tolerant, civilised and plural world community. Schools have complex and conflicting responsibilities, being both products of their cultures and cutting edges to change that culture. That is why involving the local community is essential in any movement towards inclusive education. The diversity of learners is itself a rich resource for learning. Peer tutoring and peer collaboration draws on children to act as resources for their learning communities. Parents of all learners have a deep knowledge about their

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children and this can be particularly valuable for children and young people whose learning becomes a focus of concern, such as some learners with impairments. There are, thus, learning opportunities within all communities which can be exploited for education.

Road Ahead

While inclusion is a very attractive philosophy, one that virtually every professional spoken to agrees to some degree, is that practice differs substantially from school to school and indeed from teacher to teacher.

Even though there may be no "one plan fits all", there are certain teaching strategies that meet the unique educational, social and instructional needs of all students within general education classes. These strategies are necessary so that inclusion proceeds from an ideological and value laden stance to classroom practice.

Provision for Diversity

The success of inclusion lies in the hands of the class teacher who is the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement. S/he is at the forefront of implementing the stated policies within the constructed educational realities. This requires an attitudinal change whereby all members of the community must be valued in spite of differences. Teachers must believe that all students can learn and plan for the success of diverse learners. It is imperative that teachers accept, recognise and celebrate diverse learners in the classroom i.e. they must promote equity through accepting differences.

Effective teaching in an inclusive classroom therefore demands teaching strategies that can accommodate a variety of learners with different backgrounds, needs and strengths. These strategies in my view address three crucial areas within the classroom:

- The context of learning.
- The content of learning.
- Teaching Learning Processes.

Context of Learning

If inclusion is seen as a two-way process of increasing participation and reducing or removing barriers that

inhibit the learning and participation of learners, the planning of the context of learning is a crucial element. This involves not only environmental modifications, e.g. physical arrangements, room modifications such as mounted railings at strategic locations, rearrangement of the floor space for wheelchair accessibility, etc, but also a shift in focus from the prevalent rigorous academic approach in mainstream schools, in which the measurement of academic performance is the critical variable. In an inclusive setting, where a great sense of community and trust exists because children of different ages (vertical grouping) work together in an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competitiveness, provides evidence that a carefully planned environment with relevant materials and experiences for the learners, is essential for all children.

It is important that general education accepts the notion that social skills and peer relationship are equal to, if not more important than academic achievements. Teaching strategies for enhancing a climate of trust and interactive peer relationships through cooperative learning groups work very successfully in mainstream schools. Students not only help explain material to each other but share experiences, providing multiple perspectives and mutual support. Groupings can be as varied as pairing i.e. students working in groups of two or larger groups of mixed abilities with each member assigned a specific role. e.g. time keeper, presenter, etc. Thus, cooperative-learning results in the classroom not becoming a competitive place where students attempt to prove themselves and outshine others, but environments, in which students support and nurture each other's learning.

Content of Learning

The goal of quality instruction is more often idealised than realised, as teachers struggle to provide effective instruction. Teaching has so far

been mainly based on criterion of averages, which means that while some students cannot keep up, others find teaching "too easy" and boring. In order to meet diverse needs in the classroom, differentiated instruction must be planned based on the unique learning profiles of individual students. Differentiated classrooms offer a variety of learning options designed to tap different readiness levels, through providing:

- A variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content.
- A variety of activities through which students can understand and "own" information and ideas.

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- Options through which students demonstrate what they have learnt (e.g. developing preferred stimulus-response format based on students preferred learning style written/oral/or using alternative augmentative communication systems).

To meet the varied learning needs of students in a classroom, methods that focus on differentiating instruction must move away from a

single prescribed lesson and provide teachers with the flexibility to adjust factors such as learning objectives and pace of instruction. Instruction that is concept-focused and principle-driven utilising task analysis (a breakdown of each individual step or skill, with necessary adaptations) benefits not only children with disabilities, but also other students in the classroom to reach established goals.

Teaching Learning Processes

Inclusion cannot mean simply folding all children into the status quo of the general classrooms to be fed pre-decided information. Acquiring knowledge is active, not passive. It has to transform and this requires the learner's participation. In an inclusive classroom, varied activities will often occur simultaneously. Therefore, teaching processes must undergo a shift from being teacher-centred to learner-centred. Students must develop into "active explorers" and for this, the strategy of promoting inductive thinking is a very useful teaching tool.

Utilising this strategy requires the teacher to provide all students with a series of relevant experiences, providing support to analyse rules and principles through discovery learning. Keeping this in mind, the National Council of Education, Research and Training has recently developed exemplar material on curricular adaptations, inclusive teaching and how to adopt flexibility in evaluation for children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The material is based on an approach whereby the teacher provides meaningful learning experiences to all children in the class and uses simple language and expressions that values all children. The material comprises of a number of examples that demonstrate how to change the current teaching practices in inclusive classrooms, and support students to become independent learners and actively participate in the learning process. 1.58 lakh

mainstream teachers under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have already been trained on this exemplar material.

Future Steps: Teacher Capacity Building

The development of inclusive education not only entails a constant change in teachers' values, attitudes, professional expertise and knowledge, but also on those responsible for their training and support. To deal with this 'sea-change of change', a continuous and coherent programme of professional development is needed for all educational personnel. Since the teacher will be primarily responsible for bringing about this radical change, in practice, it is vital that careful planning is undertaken to provide the required capacity building and make inclusive education a reality.

Although educators may profess a more learner centred approach to education, the methods of teaching and learning employed in teacher education may contradict that commitment and the teacher trainers may remain unconvinced. In many teacher education courses, inclusion is considered as an add-on module, usually associated with learners with impairments or those categorised as having 'special educational needs', rather than permeating the approach to education in all courses for all students. Thus, issues of gender, ethnicity, language differences etc are silently brushed aside. There is a need for urgent reflection and introspection of both general and special education courses in order to pave the way for a dynamic '*inclusive education course*' that meets the challenge of the day.

The new approach of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) is a positive step in this direction. CCE refers to a system of school-based evaluation of students that covers all aspects of students' development. It emphasizes on two fold objectives. These objectives are continuity in evaluation and assessment of all aspects of a child's educational process. Evaluation of identified aspects of students' growth and development is a continuous process rather than one annual exam or half yearly exams conducted after a specified period of time. The second term 'comprehensive' means that the process covers both the scholastic and the co-scholastic aspects of students' growth and development.

Educating students in an inclusive setting, therefore, will succeed, when it is pedagogically equitable and when the focus is on the inclusion of all learners to be taught using diverse ways of learning: education delivered through a format of questioning, research, cooperative learning, individualised expectations, and critical thinking – all generally captured under the term "best practices." Every child in school should be provided with equitable access to curriculum, textbooks and teaching learning material in the form best suited to his/her learning needs. ❑

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