

The Challenges and Opportunities to Implement Inclusive Education in West Bengal

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Abstract: Inclusive Education (IE) is a new approach towards educating the children with disability and learning difficulties with normal ones within the same roof. It brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students. It is one of the most effective ways to promote an inclusive and tolerant society. It is known that 73 million children of primary school age were out of school in 2010, down from a high of over 110 million out-of-school children in the mid-1990s, according to new estimates by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). About eighty percent of Indian population lives in rural areas without provision for special schools. It means, there are an estimated 8 million children out of school in India (Educational Statistics At a Glance, 2017), many of whom are marginalized by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. In West Bengal, inclusive education for children with disability has only recently been accepted in policy and in principle. In light of supportive policy and legislation, the present paper argues for individual initiative on part of schools to implement programmes of inclusive education for children with mild to moderate disabilities in their elementary school classrooms. The paper provides guidelines in a generalized mode that schools can follow to initiate such programmes. The guidelines were derived from an empirical study which entailed examining prevalent practices and introducing inclusion in a regular school setting. It is suggested that schools can implement inclusive education programmes if they are adequately prepared, are able to garner support of all stakeholders involved in the process and have basic resources to run the programmes. The guidelines also suggest ways in which curriculum adaptations, teaching methodology and evaluation procedures can be adapted to suit needs of children with special needs. Issues of role allocation and seeking support of parents and peers are also dealt with.

Keywords: Children with Disabilities, Special Education, Inclusive Education. The Challenges and Opportunities to Implement Inclusive Education in West Bengal

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I. Introduction

UNICEF's Report on the Status of Disability in India 2000 states that there are around 30 million children in India suffering from some form of disability. The Seventh All India Educational Survey (Seventh All India School Education Survey - NCERT, 2017), reports that out of India's 200 million school-aged children (6-14 years), 20 million require special needs education. While the national average for gross enrolment in school is over 90 per cent, less than five per cent of children with disabilities are in schools. According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the marginalized, children with disabilities remain one of the main groups being widely excluded from quality education. Disability is recognized as one of the least visible yet most potent factors in educational marginalization. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was entered into force in 2008, was ratified by India in October, 2008. It can be safely assumed that achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals will be impossible without improving access to and quality of education for children with disabilities. It is a binding on Indian government as well, being a signatory to UNCRPD. Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) was approved in India in September, 2008 to replace IEDC Scheme from 2009-10. The Scheme is 100% centrally funded. According to (Sharma, 2014), "Inclusive education is not merely about

providing access into mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. It is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system. Existing school systems in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, leadership roles will have to change. This is because inclusive education is about the participation of all children and young people and the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice". Achieving this goal in India requires serious planning and efforts.

In addition to many other requirements, implementation of inclusive education immensely requires positive attitudes towards inclusion and disability among teachers, administrators and policy planners. However, negative attitudes are still persisting among these in many cases. This is adversely affecting inclusive education scenario in India. Keeping it in view, the present paper tries to delve deeper into the issue by exploring possibilities and challenges ahead in fostering positive attitudes towards inclusive education in West Bengal.

Children with disabilities and many others who experience difficulties in learning are often marginalized within or even excluded from school systems. This paper considers the situation in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, examining particular developments that have occurred in recent years and how these compare with overall trends internationally. This analysis suggests certain barriers to progress, including attitudes within communities towards certain groups of children, traditional practices in the field of special education, and the effects of the depressed economic situation within the region. The paper concludes with a consideration of possible opportunities for improvements in provision and an outline of issues that need to be kept in mind.

Inclusive education has been defined at various ways that addresses the learning needs of the differently able children. The efforts of the Government of India over the last five decades have been towards providing comprehensive range of services towards education of children with disabilities. In 1974, the centrally sponsored scheme for Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) was introduced to provide equal opportunities to children with disabilities in general schools and facilitate their retention. The government initiatives in the area of inclusive education can be traced back to National Educational Policy, 1986, which recommended, as a goal, 'to integrate the handicapped with the general community at all levels as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence'. The World Declaration on Education for All adopted in 1990 gave further boost to the various processes already set in the country. The Rehabilitation Council of India Act 1992 initiated a training programme for the development of professionals to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. The National Policy for Persons with Disability, 2006, which attempts to clarify the framework under which the state, civil society and private sector must operate in order to ensure a dignified life for persons with disability and support for their caretakers. Most recent advancement is the Right of Children for Free and Compulsory Education (2009) which guarantees right to free and compulsory education to all children between ages six to fourteen. For education for a child with disability, the act has to be read in conjunction with Chapter V of the Persons with Disability Act, 1995. Chapter V of the PWD Act ensures that every child with disability is entitled to a free education up to the age of 18 years. Keeping in view, Govt. of India had accelerated the new scheme of Inclusive Education to achieve the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2010. Inclusion is an effort to make sure that diverse learner those with disabilities, different languages and cultures, different homes and family lives, different interests and ways of learning. Inclusive Education denotes that all children irrespective of their strengths and weaknesses will be part of the mainstream education. It is clear that education policy in India has gradually increased the focus on children and adults with special needs, and that inclusive education in regular schools has become a primary policy objective. In almost every country, inclusive education has emerged as one of the most the dominant issues in the education. With the release of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO), a large number of developing countries started reformulating their policies to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. The researches show that teachers in inclusive settings collaborate more and spend more time planning, learn new techniques from one another, participate in more professional development activities, show a greater willingness to change, and use a wider range of creative strategies to meet students' needs. All school going children, whether they are disabled or not, have the right to education as they are the future citizens of the country. Today it is widely accepted that inclusion maximizes the potential of the vast majority of students, ensures their rights, and is the preferred educational approach for the 21st century.

Concept Meaning of Inclusive Education -

Inclusive education is based on the principle that schools should provide for all children regardless of any perceived difference, disability or other social, cultural and linguistic difference. The diverse needs of these learners and the quest to make schools more learning friendly requires regular and special education teachers to consult and collaborate with one another as well as with family and community in order to develop effective strategies, teaching and learning (Sharma, Inclusive Education Planning and Management of Curriculum, 2014), within inclusive setups. With the right training, strategies and support nearly all children with SEN and disabilities can be included successfully in mainstream education.

The 'Index for Inclusion' summarizes some of the ideas which make up the view of inclusion within the Index as follows Inclusion in education involves:

- Putting inclusive values into action.
- Viewing every life and every death as of equal worth.
- Supporting everyone to feel that they belong.
- Increasing participation for children and adults in learning and teaching activities, relationships and communities of local schools.
- Reducing exclusion, discrimination, barriers to learning and participation.
- Restructuring cultures, policies and practices to respond to diversity in ways that value everyone equally.
- Linking education to local and global realities.
- Learning from the reduction of barriers for some children to benefit children more widely.
- Viewing differences between children and between adults as resources for learning.
- Acknowledging the right of children to an education of high quality in their locality.
- Improving schools for staff and parents / carers as well as children.
- Emphasizing the development of school communities and values, as well as achievements.
- Fostering mutually sustaining relationships between schools and surrounding communities.
- Recognizing that inclusion in education is one aspect of inclusion in society.

The discussion on inclusive education started with proposal of the social model of disability, which proposes systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposefully 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.

II. Background Of The Inclusive Education Programme In India -

The government of India is constitutionally committed to ensuring the right of every child to basic education. The Government of India has created numerous policies around special education since the country's independence in 1947. One of the earliest formal initiatives undertaken by the GOI was the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme of 1974 (Seventh all India School Education Survey - NCERT, 2017). The Kothari Commission (1966) which highlighted the importance of educating children with disabilities during the post-independence period (Sharma B. , 2011), In 1980s the then ministry of Welfare, Govt. of India, realized the crucial need of an institution to monitor and regulate the HRD programmes in the field of disability rehabilitation. Till 1990s, ninety percent of India's estimated 40 million children in the age group- four-sixteen years with physical and mental disabilities are being excluded from mainstream education. The National Policy on Education, 1986 (NPE, 1986), and the Programme of Action (1992) stresses the need for integrating children with special needs with other groups. The Government of India implemented the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) in 1994-95. In late 90s (i.e. in 1997) the philosophy of inclusive education is added in District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).

This programme laid special emphasis on the integration of children with mild to moderate disabilities, in line with world trends, and became one of the GOI's largest flagship programmes of the time in terms of funding with 40,000 million rupees (approximately 740 million US dollars). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched to achieve the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education in 2001, is one such initiative. Three important aspect of UEE are access, enrolment and retention of all children in 6-14 years of age. A zero rejection policy has been adopted under SSA, which ensures that every Child with Special Needs (CWSN), irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 has laid down a clear context of inclusive education. In 2005, the Ministry of Human Resource Development implemented a National Action Plan for the inclusion in education of children and youth with disabilities. Furthermore, IEDC was revised and named „Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage“ (IEDSS) in 2009-10 to provide assistance for the inclusive education of the disabled children at 9th and 10th classes. This scheme now subsumed under Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) from 2013. It is important to integrate these children into regular schools to help them socialize and build their confidence.

Table : 1 Status of implementation of IE at a glance during 2012-2013, Extension of support services to CWSN

No. of CWSN Identified	No. of CWSN enrolled in school	No. of CWSN covered through SRPs/Resource room	No. of CWSN covered through HBE	Total coverage of CWSN	Status of distribution of aids and appliances			No. of Special Educators working	No. of IE volunteers were appointed	% of IE volunteers were appointed	Total no. Of schools	No. of schools made barrier free	No. of schools with DTFs
					No. of CWSN provided aids and appliances through ALIMCO	No. of CWSN provided aids and appliances through othersource	Total aids and appliances provided						
265031	179579	24732	33965	238276	14024	5158	19209	1346	1505	72.4	66934	48487	8071

Sources : (Paschim Banga Sarva Siksha Mission Annual Report 2012-2013, 2014)

III. 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 levels of government and non 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 Dash (Dash, 2012), 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.

Inclusive education is a binding and priority for government of West Bengal. However, a wide gap in policy and practice exists in the country with respect to inclusive education. There are a number of barriers that hinder proper practice of inclusive education in our country. Based on the literature and personal experiences, the authors believe these barriers to include the following:

- The inefficiency of teachers to develop and use instructional materials for inclusion students.
- Attitudes towards inclusion and disability among teachers, administrators and policy planners.
- Attitudes of parents of children without disabilities.
- Lack of awareness about children with disabilities among general teachers.
- Improper curriculum adaptation.
- School environment.
- School management.
- Support services.
- Family collaboration.
- Insufficient and improper pre-service teacher education.
- Negative self-perceptions of children with disabilities.
- Negative attitudes of normal peers.
- ICT availability and related competencies.
- Improper policy planning and lack-luster implementation.
- Difficulties in physical access.
- Expenses involved.

Inclusive education does away with the practice of segregating students with learning and/or physical challenges from the rest of the student body. While the practice of inclusion places extra demands on students and facility logistics, there are numerous benefits to all students, both disabled and non-disabled. Teachers in inclusive classrooms must incorporate a variety of teaching methods in order to best reach students of varying learning abilities. This has benefits even for those students who would be placed in a traditional classroom, as this increases their engagement in the learning process. Even gifted and accelerated learners benefit from an environment that stresses responsiveness from all students.

Perhaps most importantly, inclusive classrooms encourage open and frank dialogue about differences as well as a respect for those with different abilities, cultural backgrounds and needs.

Despite the benefits, there still are many barriers to the implementation of inclusive education. A UNESCO article, "Inclusive Education," outlined many of them, including:

Attitudes -

Societal norms often are the biggest barrier to inclusion. Old attitudes die hard, and many still resist the accommodation of students with disabilities and learning issues, as well as those from minority cultures. Prejudices against those with differences can lead to discrimination, which inhibits the educational process. The challenges of inclusive education might be blamed on the students' challenges instead of the shortcomings of the educational system. (Dash, 2012)

Physical Barriers -

In some districts, students with physical disabilities are expected to attend schools that are inaccessible to them. In economically-deprived school systems, especially those in rural areas, dilapidated and poorly-cared-for buildings can restrict accessibility. Some of these facilities are not safe or healthy for any students. Many schools don't have the facilities to properly accommodate students with special needs, and local governments lack either the funds or the resolve to provide financial help. Environmental barriers can include doors, passageways, stairs and ramps, and recreational areas. These can create a barrier for some students to simply enter the school building or classroom.

Curriculum -

A rigid curriculum that does not allow for experimentation or the use of different teaching methods can be an enormous barrier to inclusion. Study plans that don't recognize different styles of learning hinder the school experience for all students, even those not traditionally recognized as having physical or mental challenges.

Teachers -

Teachers who are not trained or who are unwilling or unenthusiastic about working with differently-abled students are a drawback to successful inclusion. Training often falls short of real effectiveness, and instructors already straining under large workloads may resent the added duties of coming up with different approaches for the same lessons.

Language and communication -

Many students are expected to learn while being taught in a language that is new and in some cases unfamiliar to them. This is obviously a significant barrier to successful learning. Too often, these students face discrimination and low expectations.

Socio-economic factors -

Areas that are traditionally poor and those with higher-than-average unemployment rates tend to have schools that reflect that environment, such as run-down facilities, students who are unable to afford basic necessities and other barriers to the learning process. Violence, poor health services, and other social factors make create barriers even for traditional learners, and these challenges make inclusion all but impossible.

Funding -

Adequate funding is a necessity for inclusion and yet it is rare. Schools often lack adequate facilities, qualified and properly-trained teachers and other staff members, educational materials and general support. Sadly, lack of resources is pervasive throughout many educational systems.

Organization of the Education System:

Centralized education systems are rarely conducive to positive change and initiative. Decisions come from the school system's high-level authorities whose initiatives focus on employee compliance more than quality learning. The top levels of the organization may have little or no idea about the realities teachers face on a daily basis.

Policies as Barriers -

Many policy makers don't understand or believe in inclusive education, and these leaders can stonewall efforts to make school policies more inclusive. This can exclude whole groups of learners from the mainstream educational system, thereby preventing them from enjoying the same opportunities for education and employment afforded to traditional students.

Overcoming the many barriers to inclusive education will require additional funding, but even more importantly, it requires the change of old and outdated attitudes. Studies support what many classroom teachers know by experience: that the benefits inclusion provides to all students easily justifies the effort.

IV. Conclusion

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education could be formed and developed in the context of an educational system which can provide some specific conditions in order to have a good practice in this field. Those conditions refer to a restructure of the curricula, more help from support teachers, more time for preparing the educational activities, decreasing the number of students in one class, creating and developing opportunities for interactive partnerships between teachers, students, support teachers and parents and so on. The reform of the curriculum should be made in parallel with a proper training for teachers regarding their knowledge of inclusion and its principles. The difficulties are inherent to any change or reform, but it is necessary to develop an educational system which can properly respond to all the needs, characteristics and individual differences of all children in school (Menon, 2014).

The separate teacher education programs for regular and special education do not equip teachers with an integrated knowledge of the expected roles, functions and responsibilities to meet the diversity of learning needs in the classroom. A need is being felt for a new paradigm for the preparation of teachers. There exists the need for teacher educators of regular and special education at all levels of teacher education to develop a "whole faculty approach" in facilitating an inclusive pre-service teacher education curriculum embedded across all discipline areas (Sexena, 2008)

Within a tradition of a dual regular and special education system in India, the Government is promoting educational reforms that encourage an inclusive approach to education. A move towards an inclusive approach to education in India is being promoted through collaboration and support between teachers trained in regular and special education. Thus, different perceptions of pre-service teachers preparing to work either in elementary schools or in special schools are a particular concern for people devoted to inclusive education. A need is being felt for better teacher preparation due to the very low understandings of inclusive education and pre-service teachers' perceived lack of skills, knowledge, experience, and/or training for an inclusive approach. Investigating the determinants of teachers' attitudes and behaviour and their relative importance is crucial for improving teaching practices, initial teacher education and professional development opportunities for effective inclusion of children with special needs. (Menon, 2014) We need to develop an inclusive design of learning to make the education joyful for all children so that the education for them is welcoming, learner friendly and beneficial and they feel as a part of it not apart from it. Summing up, authors feel and believe that many initiatives have been introduced at all levels to implement inclusive education in west Bengal but the road ahead is still quite long.

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