Overcoming Challenges within Schools

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Inclusive education has grown from the belief that education is a basic human right and that it provides the foundation for a more just society. All learners have a right to education, regardless of their individual characteristics or difficulties. Inclusive education initiatives often have a particular focus on those groups, which, in the past, have been excluded from educational opportunities. These groups include children living in poverty, those from ethnic and linguistic minorities, girls (in some societies), children from remote areas and those with disabilities or other special educational needs. The latter are often the most marginalised, both within education and in society in general. Inclusive education encourages policy-makers and managers to look at the barriers within the education system, how they arise and how they can be removed. These barriers usually include: • inappropriately-designed curricula • teachers who are not trained to work with children who have a wide range of needs • inappropriate media for teaching • inaccessible buildings.

The major impetus for inclusive education came from the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca. The conference recommendations were based

on the principle of inclusion: '… schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups.'

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. It also "aims to enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem.'' (UNESCO, 2003:7) Inclusive education is also a new way of thinking which embraces various implications. According to UNESCO (2001: 31) inclusive education: a) acknowledges that all children can learn and that all need some form of support in learning; b) aims to uncover and minimize barriers to learning; c) is broader than formal schooling and includes the home, the community and other opportunities for education outside of schools; d) is about changing attitudes, behaviors, teaching methods, curricula and environments to meet the needs of all children; e) is a dynamic process which is constantly evolving according to local cultures and contexts and is part of the wider strategy to promote an inclusive society. In another context inclusive education is sometimes seen as a" political strategy based on human rights and democratic principles, that confronts all forms of discriminations, as part of a concern to develop an inclusive society and to ensure that some students receive additional resources and are not ignored or neglected." (UNESCO, 1998: 25) Whether or not this happens depends critically on teacher variables, specifically their willingness to take on this task and their ability to carry it out. …Inclusion stands for an educational system that encompasses a wide range diversity of pupils and that differentiates education in response to their diversity. The national curriculum framework for school education (NCFSE) (2000), brought out by the NCERT, recommended inclusive school for all without specific reference to pupil with Special Educational Needs (SEN) as way of providing quality education to all learners. Though in India there is no formal or official definition of inclusion, but the draft scheme on Inclusive Education uses the following definition: Inclusive Education means all learners, young people-with or without disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary preschool provisions, schools, and community educational settings with appropriate network of support services (Draft of Inclusive Education Scheme, MHRD, 2003) National Curriculum Framework (2005) A policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout our education system. The participation of all children needs to be ensured in all spheres of their life in and outside the school. Schools need to become center that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially the differently abled children from marginalized sections, and children in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education (NCF 2005, P85).

School development is now increasingly focussed on the right to Education for All. In describing its vision for Education for All, the Dakar World Education Forum (April 2000) stated clearly that inclusive education is vital if this goal is to be achieved. As a result, more and more countries are working to help their schools become inclusive.

In many countries a range of measures will be necessary to dismantle barriers that students with disabilities face in their pursuit of education. They will include actions in relation to the following: The role of teachers and educators. Teachers are critical actors in inclusive education and have a tremendous influence on the quality of education that a child receives. In many cases teachers are under-resourced, working in over-crowded classrooms and lacking the capacity to adequately address the needs of all students. Inclusion requires sufficient numbers of teachers who are adequately prepared and trained. Teachers should receive support to make possible inclusive approaches, with specialist teaching support where necessary. Teachers should also receive training, including on policies and strategies to promote the right of persons with disabilities to participate in the educational process at all levels, to enable them to adapt the educational environment to meet a range of learning needs. Such training may include, as relevant, a focus on utilization of accessible technology, where available, to enhance the educational experience of students with disabilities. Ensuring that persons with disabilities can become teachers can both bring in specialist skills and understanding, and can make a strong contribution to reducing discrimination, giving all children role models .

The curriculum at all levels must be made disability-inclusive, ensuring that the voice and image of persons with disabilities as participants in curricula is reflected in it. Educational materials should be made available in accessible formats, such as Braille and in easy to read and understand forms. Differences in communication and information needs must also be taken into account in order to accommodate the diversity of learners with disabilities. The development of standards and guidelines for inclusive education can support a coherent country-wide approach to inclusive education. Anita Julka , Sudesh Mukhopadhyay, Sidhi Vyas , Madhulika Sharma, Anupriya Deba Salim (2010),NCERT Publication, Including Children with Disabilities ,Primary Stage .Here NCERT faculty also undertook a research study to find out the range and extent of the challenges teachers face in mainstreaming children with special needs in their classrooms and schools. Based on this study, the faculty's interaction with such children and the experiences of others workings towards educating all children together the research report on challenges were identified. The first phase of the development process involved individual interactions with teachers and parents in different States and understanding the challenges faced. Consistently, teachers reported the need for more training in accommodating and adapting the curriculum, and teaching and assessment techniques to meet the needs of Children with Special Needs (CWSN). Many teachers felt inclusion of CWSN was an additional burden and these children should be taught in separate schools.

Education and ICT: Modern information technology is rapidly transforming the way teaching and learning takes place. A wide range of new tools and technologies is

changing education and helping to make it more accessible for everyone, including persons with disabilities. These include real-time student information systems which facilitate checking attendance, monitoring progress, examining disciplinary records and the educational timetable; cloud-based learning platforms for teachers and students to store class notes, research resources and assignments; video-sharing websites in the classroom such as YouTube or Vimeo; remote learning through a second wave of massive open online courses; digitized libraries and archives from Google books and e-books to journal articles and newspaper digital archives; new assessment and formative assessment tools for students; a new range of plagiarism-detection services; and finally voice-recognition and speech-recognition technology. Lack of sign language interpreters or accessible educational materials can pose an insurmountable barrier for deaf or blind persons.

 Physical accessibility. Students cannot attend school if buildings are physically inaccessible to them. To ensure enjoyment of the right of persons with disabilities to an education, accessibility must, therefore, be addressed broadly, in relation to, for example, entranceways to buildings and classrooms, appropriate seating, restroom facilities, and transportation to the educational facility. Lack of accessible transportation is frequently also an impediment.

Attitudinal barriers. Negative attitudes and harmful beliefs create significant barriers to the education of persons with disabilities. In some instances, as a result of misguided beliefs children with disabilities are not permitted to attend school. For example, fear and ignorance about the causes of epilepsy can result in exclusion from school for children with seizure disorders. Teacher attitudes are complex, built on a matrix of factors that may include such variables as personal bias and prejudice, a dislike of change, the wish for a stable and manageable classroom environment, a resentment of the extra work load implied by mainstreaming, a paucity of knowledge concerning exceptional children and a lack of experience and exposure to such individuals (Winzer, 1985, p. *157*). As Winzer (1984a, 1984b, 1986,1987) has determined through various attitude studies, there are a multitude o f factors underlying the development and expression of teacher attitudes, many of which relate to teachers' lack of preparation to teach exceptional students and their difficulty with non-traditional teaching approaches (Putnam, 1993).

Persons with disabilities who do attend schools may face low expectations or other forms of negative belief. In some instances students may also face violence, abuse or social isolation. Measures to achieve genuinely inclusive education must, therefore, address attitudinal barriers, including by educating parents, teachers and students on the rights of persons with disabilities.

 Economic Barriers. Where required to be paid by families, school fees and indirect costs of schools, such as books and uniforms, constitute a barrier to the achievement of universal primary and secondary education. Fees and expenses pose a particular burden for those living in poverty, which is experienced in disproportionately high rates by persons with disabilities and their families. In some cases the families of children with disabilities must contend with fees because of their disability. For

example, those who attend special schools may have to pay fees not required of children attending mainstream schools. In some cases children with disabilities at mainstream schools are asked to pay for their own class attendance as a pre-condition for their attendance. To address this, Governments must guarantee that primary education is free for all children, and should ensure that fees are not charged for special public schools, and that under no circumstances do children with disabilities incur fees in relation to their education that are different from those incurred by children without disabilities. Costs associated with reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities, including assistants, should be included in regular school budgets.

DPO Participation :To promote a fully inclusive education process it is essential for government officials to consult with DPOs. In particular government officials should ensure the participation of DPOs that represent various disability groups. DPOs are perhaps best placed to serve as resources on accessibility regarding education reform processes and public decision making more generally. Teacher training schools, teachers and administrators should likewise regard DPOs as key partners in advancing inclusive education. DPOs may have valuable contributions to make in areas including the following: ► training of teachers; ► designing accessible curricula; ► advising on accessibility to the created environment; ► advising on communications access; ► identifying strategies for inclusion; ► providing support to families of children with disabilities. A disability access focal point could be designated within a school to serve as a resource and to interface with the disability community, families of students with disabilities, and others. DPOs should be included in all outreach to civil society organizations relating to school attendance.

Highlighting the Essential Role of Parents. Parents are the first educators of the child. Parents play an important role in inclusive education and in preventing violations such as the confinement of children with disabilities to separate rooms. Parents of children with disabilities also play many other roles, from providing accessible transport to raising awareness, becoming involved in civil society organisations and liaising with schools and the health sector so that children have access to appropriate equipment and support to allow them to continue to attend school. Parents have an important contribution to make and it is important that this contribution is recognized and used.

Accessing Complaints Mechanisms An important element of the right to education includes ensuring that persons with disabilities and their families can seek redress in instances where their rights have been denied. In seeking to guarantee inclusive education, States should therefore ensure that complaints mechanisms are accessible to persons with disabilities and that complaints are addressed quickly within a framework that is fully accessible to all.

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