

DECONSTRUCTING INCLUSION

DIPI PATHAK

Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Disability is still viewed as a social welfare issue, and as a result, the disabled are seen as people requiring charitable assistance, who continue to remain isolated from the mainstream. In addition, many stigmas and myths are tagged to disabilities. Besides there are many other important factors like gender, socio-economic status, region and religion which impact how disability is understood and dealt with. Able bodied persons are ill-informed about the “persons with disabilities” and they lack awareness and sensitivity towards them. “Persons with disabilities” face many developmental and societal challenges/barriers that often lead to their social exclusion. If these are recognized and addressed, the scenario can be changed. To make the society more humane, caring and inclusive, we need various policy measures and sincere effort of all stakeholders and all citizens of India. A number of policy initiatives were taken over a period of time. The most notable among them is PWD Act 1995 and the establishment of Rehabilitation Council of India and National Institutions for each area of disability.

KEYWORDS: Barriers, Humane-Society, Inclusion, Inclusive-Education, Inclusive-Society, Persons with Disabilities

INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious country, with one Constitution for all its citizens, which includes “persons with disabilities” and other marginalized groups. Over the last two decades, there has been a strong felt need to remove barriers and make society more inclusive for all, especially for “persons with disabilities”. There has correspondingly been a paradigm shift, focusing on the rights of “persons with disabilities”, generating what is called the ‘rights based model of disability. The earlier models are the medical model which follows a diagnosis and treatment approach and the social model which focuses on the social integration of the disabled in society. The shift to the rights based approach has emerged from recognition of the fact that society excludes “persons with disabilities” rather than them excluding themselves.

Attitudinally, society, in India, is, generally, not designed to meet the specific needs of “persons with disabilities”, because it caters to the standardized norms and set notions for able-bodied persons. What has to be understood by all is that this leads to exclusion of those who don’t fit in with the norms. Inclusion requires re-thinking and re-organising of one’s ideas, attitudes, policies and practices. In its true spirit, inclusion means ensuring a society in which persons with disabilities are enabled to lead an active and independent life, as far as possible. It is based on Wolfensberger’s principle of normalization which holds that “all persons, regardless of ability, should live and learn in environments, as close to normal as possible”. The basic idea behind normalisation is that “persons with disabilities” should be viewed in the same way as the able bodied. It is not morally and ethically right to exclude them from mainstream education and society just because they are different. Over the years, there has been an increasing realization that all children, including “persons with disabilities” and other marginalized children, have special needs, which can be addressed in an inclusive setting.

The World Bank defines social inclusion, “as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. Social inclusion aims to empower the poor and marginalized to take advantage of the burgeoning global opportunities. It ensures that all people have a voice in decision making that could affect their day-to-day lives, in order to enjoy equal access to all political, social and physical spaces”. The importance of inclusion was, also, recognized by the former President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, who stated, “If development is about bringing excluded people into society, then “persons with disabilities” belong in schools, legislatures, at work, on buses, at the theatre and everywhere else that those who are not disabled take for granted.”

This necessitates that environmental barriers be removed, reduced, prevented or totally eliminated. These barriers begin with under-estimation of the capabilities, potential and abilities of “persons with disabilities”. Physical and attitudinal barriers are, also, found at all levels of society, such as inaccessible schools, public buildings, recreational facilities and public transportation. This, in turn, leads to under-expectation, under-achievement and less allocation of resources for “persons with disabilities”.

The central argument in my paper is that “persons with disabilities” continue to face discrimination and are unable to fully enjoy their basic human rights, as compared to able-bodied people. Further, given that their inclusion in society is a matter of right and social justice, the attitude towards them and provisions made for them, should not be based on pity, goodwill or charity. Their inclusion should, instead, be an integral part of their human rights. Education is a right and not a privilege. Therefore, “persons with disabilities” should be given this right, for their progress and development, which in turn, will help society to develop and progress. In this context, there is a need to promote public awareness for all stake holders (such as parents, pupils, teaching and support staff, rights and disability advocates), about the discrimination and barriers faced by “persons with disabilities” and other socially marginalized groups. Consequently, we need to reframe our infrastructure and laws, to remove these barriers, to enable them to fully participate, as equal members of society.

The question that arises here is not whether, but how “persons with disabilities”, can be included, as equal, contributing members of society. The process of including them would begin with enabling them to have experiences of independence in their everyday lives. Inclusive education is also a major step in this direction. It operates on the premise, that the earlier these children are given the opportunity to interact and participate with their peers, the greater will be the benefit to them and eventually to society, as a whole.

At this juncture, I would like to point out that a range of labels have been used for “persons with disabilities” but, over time, the terminology and language used to describe them has changed. Language has always played a very important role in excluding them in the past. However, more recently, the inclusive education movement has broadened its horizon to include children who are marginalized on account of gender, socio-economic, religion, region, caste, etc. Thus, the shift towards inclusion is not merely an infrastructural or technical change, but a philosophical movement, rooted in the dignity and human rights of all persons.

Conceptualizing an Inclusive Society

An inclusive society is defined as one, where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs are met, so that they can live with dignity. Disability, poverty and social exclusion affect all groups, especially women, children, elders and “persons with disabilities”, all of whom are at a higher risk of exclusion. Social inclusion is both an outcome and a process of improving the terms, on which people take part in society. It empowers the poor and

marginalized to take advantage of opportunities, to enjoy equal access as the able bodied, to social, physical and political spaces. Social exclusion is due to multiple disadvantages that marginalized people, especially “persons with disabilities” and women face and are multi-faceted. Therefore, multiple responses are required to end exclusion. An inclusive society recognizes that the needs of “persons with disabilities” are no different from the needs of able bodied people. So to reiterate, the inclusion of “persons with disabilities” is no longer an act of pity, charity or welfare; instead, it is now a process influenced by human rights that apply to the entire population, including the government’s commitment to all its citizens, based on the principles of equality and social justice, enshrined in our constitution. Inclusion means going beyond impairment/disabilities in the lives of “persons with disabilities”. Nobody understands the impact of exclusion better, than those who experience it in their everyday lives, especially “persons with disabilities”, and the socially marginalized. They are no different in their need for warmth, love and friendship and should be helped, by all, to lessen the impact of their impairment/disability, in their everyday lives. Their vulnerabilities need acknowledgement, by developing their capabilities and potential. Therefore, knowledge and awareness of their capabilities is essential and there is an urgent need to change the attitudes and perceptions of society towards them.

There is also a need to understand how inclusion works and examine the hindrances, obstacles and barriers to find solutions for inclusion. Awareness, understanding and acceptance of “persons with disabilities” and other marginalized groups, in the wider society, must be promoted, structures modified and changed for better inclusion. Public buildings, roads, buses, trains and recreation facilities need to be re-designed and modified for accessibility to all citizens. Health is fundamental to the well-being of all, and so every family should have access to health and care, public buildings and transportation, along with recreation and cultural activities. Their social acceptance, therefore, is very important for inclusion and society needs to become more compassionate, caring, civil and humane.

An inclusive society respects and acknowledges differences such as impairment/ disability, gender, age, race, ethnicity, religious, linguistic, regional, financial, and so on, generating feelings of empathy and, thereby, benefitting everyone. It acknowledges and accepts that all children, including children with disabilities and other marginalised, can learn and ensures that the methodologies and curriculum meet the needs of all children, with or without disabilities. It involves their parents in their education and other activities of the school. Most children are happy because there are teachers and professionals to help meet their needs and demands. All children benefit from one another and develop and continue friendships outside the classroom as well. There is respect for diversity and individual uniqueness.

Gender Challenges in an Inclusive Society

A major roadblock to social inclusion is gender. There is a need to recognize and acknowledge that gender discrimination, has a double impact on girls with disabilities. They have to struggle to be included, educated and accepted by society. They face ‘double discrimination’ on account of being female and disabled. They thus require special provisions and policies for their development and inclusion. They also need protection and prevention from all types of violence and abuse. Other requirements include gender awareness and sensitization programmes, for the general public, parents and care givers, scholarships and other assistance for girls with disabilities, recruitment of more female teachers and more research on education for girls with disabilities, specially focusing on their enrolment, retention, barriers and various other problems.

Inclusive Education as a Strategic Approach to building an Inclusive Society

Inclusive education means that schools must be flexible and be ready to accommodate a wide range of children. In an inclusive school all children have the right to be educated, with their peers, in regular classrooms where meaningful learning opportunities are available to all. 'All' includes children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. In effect, it means the child needs to attend the age appropriate class in the school in his/her vicinity, where his/her needs and requirements are individually tailored for support. For inclusive education to be meaningful, the school curriculum should not be rigid. It needs to be differentiated, according to the needs and requirements of a wide range of children. The classroom size should be small, so that children are taught in small groups and segregation is avoided. Children should be taught to help and support each other, rather than to compete. It should be made mandatory that all the new schools be designed, in such a way, that all school facilities are accessible to all, including children with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

The inclusive school can be seen as a microcosm of the larger society. The school is a society in miniature therefore it should work for the betterment and uplifting of all children, including those with disabilities, especially girls, street and working children, children belonging to SC/ST, and children from ethnic, religious, linguistic minorities. As society moves towards inclusion, schools need to do the same. They should try to create a more humane, caring and democratic learning environment, so that all children, from all walks of life, become important members of the school and society. The education system in India, generally, does not cater to the diversity amongst students. Learning techniques should be adapted to suit a wide variety of learning styles, without segregating the diverse needs of children with disabilities. Many of the adjustments made, to include this diverse group is likely to benefit all.

Inclusive schools will have committed staff, inclusive classrooms, reflective teachers, supportive school culture, relevant curriculum, and instruction specific to the need and requirement of each child. All children will develop good social and academic skills, if schools try to include all children, regardless of their physical, social, emotional, intellectual, linguistic, religious and other limitations. In a broader sense, inclusion is about respecting, recognizing and accepting the differences of all children. The development of inclusive education requires certain changes and modifications in the overall system. Access to education, for children with disabilities, is as important as for their able bodied peers. To function effectively and properly, there is a need to address certain issues such as accessibility, teachers' attitude, peers, parents and other stake holders, who are actively involved in this endeavor. The emphasis should not be only on getting children with disabilities to school, but ensure that once in school they have equal access, opportunities to receive education, appropriate to their requirements and needs, on par with their able bodied peers. Without this, children with disabilities, will be ignored, feel left out and will, probably, be forced out of school.

Inclusive approaches to educating children with disabilities are the ones which are based on the social model and the rights based approach. To date, the education system has been designed, in such a way, that it has created a hindrance and barriers against the education of children with disabilities. In the twenty first century, children with disabilities constitute a significant number, especially out-of-school children, mostly girls with disabilities and children residing in rural areas. Since education, now, is a fundamental right, therefore all children, regardless of their ability and disability, gender, social status and the region they belong too (urban/rural), should be given equal access and opportunity to quality education.

It is also important to understand that inclusion is not about placement, but is more about a philosophy of acceptance and belonging in society. For effective inclusion of children with disabilities, early identification and intervention is essential. Parents are a key part of successful inclusion. They, along with teachers and medical professionals, have a significant influence over their children's future. Parents, often, struggle for the inclusion and human rights of their children and need support, training and empowerment, so that they become more equipped for their betterment. "Persons with disabilities", and their organizations, can be made partners to achieve inclusion. Government and NGOs should work together with parents and communities to mobilize people to change their views and attitudes towards "persons with disabilities".

The position which I support is that inclusive schools are the effective means of through which we can build an inclusive society, taking care of discriminatory attitudes and achieving education for all, in a real sense. The emphasis in inclusion is on full and equal participation and respect for the educational, social, and civil rights of all.

Challenges to Inclusive Education and Ways Ahead

Many academicians and practitioners have expressed what the barriers and challenges to Inclusive Education are. I have made an attempt to summarize them as follows:

- Lack of awareness, negative attitude of people towards disability, socio-economic background, differences and impairments, lack of knowledge about impairment/disability, communication barriers and an inaccessible, unsafe and a barrier-free environment
- Inadequate policies and legislation for "persons with disabilities", inappropriate depiction of disabled in the print and electronic media, gender discrimination.
- Concentration of services and schools, mostly in urban areas, as compared to rural and remote areas.
- Lack of overall facilities in school, including lack of funds/resources and limited teaching learning materials, aids and equipment, inappropriate and inadequate trained teachers, support staff and services.
- An inflexible curriculum and school hours, improper infra-structure and a skewed teacher-student ratio
- The non-involvement and non-recognition of parents of "persons with disabilities" and resistance of some parents
- Different interventions for different kinds and types of disabilities

Having Summarised the Barriers, I Would Now Like to Propose the Following Suggestions to Make Inclusion Possible

- Understanding that there is no one right way or one ideal setting to achieve inclusion, as there is no prerequisite behaviours or skills required for a child to be successfully included.
- Providing teachers special training and a proper support system. An individualised educational plan, in accordance with the unique and specific needs and requirements, with plenty of input from parents, para-medical staff, would work best.
- Recognising that inclusion facilitates kindness, consideration, empathy, co-operation and compassion and,

therefore, everybody must work together with patience, positivity, persistence and politeness

- Understanding that the various modes of communication, in an inclusive classroom, are: oral, writing, reading, Braille, sign language and so on and making arrangements and preparation for this.
- Building collaboration among stakeholders, (principals, vice-principals, teachers, students, other school staff of the school, office staff, canteen staff, medical professionals, counsellors, therapists, community, parents, guardians, care givers, attendants), as they can work together and support each other better, rather than helping the child in isolation. This will also lead to better home-school continuity.
- Accepting that inclusive education is a journey, where all are learning. It is important for everyone to be patient with themselves and with others, and talking with others always helps. The comfort level for children with disabilities increases and able bodied children become less fearful of those who look and behave differently. Thus, able bodied children, gain from this, too.
- Ensuring that children and teachers learn to communicate with each other and have access to multiple ways of expressing themselves and understanding the other. They may be encouraged to use a wide variety of technologies. In the case of children with disabilities, the focus should be more on what they can do and less on what they cannot do.

Support for Inclusive Education from Policies

Many important policies have given explicit support and emphasis to inclusive education as a means to ensuring a more inclusive society.

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), refers to a move from the term ‘special educational needs’ to ‘inclusive education’, and states that “...schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions...this should include disabled and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups”. These inclusive schools “...must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. Actually, the origin of inclusive education can be attributed to The Salamanca Statement, which called upon all governments and urged them to “adopt as a matter of law/policy the principles of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise”.

The Jomtien, Salamanca, and Dakar Declarations focused on education of all children including children with disabilities.

The United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD – 2006) enshrines the right of all children, including children with disabilities, to an inclusive education. Article 24, of the Convention, states that: “Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education... on the basis of disability”.

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (PWD - 1995), section 30 stipulates that the appropriate governments shall prepare a comprehensive education scheme to make

provision for "...the removal of architectural barriers from schools, colleges or other institutions, imparting vocational and professional training"... creating barrier free facilities and states that "special consideration should be kept in mind for free access, movement and safety of the "persons with disabilities by providing Braille, auditory symbols and building ramps for easy access by wheelchair users".

Despite all the policy support, it is important to highlight that inclusion is not without controversies. This emerges from differences in how experts view the concept. There is also a considerable amount of debate about whether inclusion is fully achievable and also, how it can be achieved. Some children thrive in inclusion, others languish. The debate that exists regarding the usefulness and de-construction of special education and the development of a system that will incorporate and meet the needs of all children, including children with disabilities and other marginalized groups, cannot be ignored. Those who propagate inclusion think that normal schooling can accommodate all types of children, including those with disabilities, as they assume that it will benefit all children. Those who oppose inclusion, argue that the traditional classroom size and resources are inadequate for the management, accommodation and assimilation of children with disabilities. Today, the distinction between normal education and special education is blurred. Some experts, educators, teachers, parents, believe that inclusion is not a good idea. Others believe that special needs children only benefit from and with their typical peers. A few parents of able bodied children feel that their children's education has been diluted, due to inclusion.

In conclusion, we can say that inclusion is not an end product, but is a process; inclusion is a journey not a destination, at which we arrive; it's a road upon which we travel to reach our destination; inclusion really works if it's done right; inclusion is a way of life. Inclusion is not just about schools; it covers every aspect of life. Creating a teaching-learning friendly and inclusive environment is a process, a journey. There are no ready-made, quick fix solutions or set paths to inclusion. It is mainly a process of self-discovery. Each issue is important for facilitating inclusion. At the policy level, disability is seen as having a number of issues such as health, education, social welfare, employment and so on. The relevance and effectiveness of policies related to disabilities depends on actively engaging, involving and consulting disability organisations, representatives of disabled people, the stakeholders and "persons with disabilities" for better outreach and in formulating policies which will be relevant and useful for them.

A few critical issues can be identified, such as finance/resource allocation, participation and access, pre-service and in-service teacher training, school reform and restructuring, identification and early intervention, human rights and policy/legislation, capacity building and sustainability, through NGO's and community participation and involvement. The government must analyze the adequacy and effectiveness of outreach of its policies and programmes, periodically. In effect, the whole education system needs an overhauling, to meet the unique and diverse needs and requirements of all children, including children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. The major obstacle to inclusive education is possibly the limited capacity in the education system and schools, in terms of infrastructure, teacher training and curriculum to meet the diverse needs and requirements of all children, who suffer from different types and kinds of disabilities and have different requirements and needs. Regular teachers are expected to teach the children with disabilities and lack training to tackle such children. Teachers, often, complain about several issues such as, their disruptive behaviour, the fact that they cannot handle the academic pace, the time required to adapt to the curriculum, deal with assistive devices, lack of support staff and so on. Current teacher education programs do not teach special education, as a compulsory foundation paper, for all trainee teachers. The focus should be to train teachers at both the in-service and pre-service

levels. Provision and training should also be provided to administrators, non-teaching and other support staff. Parents of disabled children may not be willing to place their children in an inclusive school, fearing that their child may not be accepted and, instead, be ridiculed by able bodied children. Untrained teachers and staff would not be able to handle and take proper care of their children. Many argue that special education helps children with disabilities, as it provides individualized and personalized instruction, which helps them to adjust, as quickly as possible. Thus special schools and integrated schools continue to flourish.

However, today, the shift towards inclusive schooling has become more apparent. Inclusive society will have a different look and feel. We need to develop an inclusive environment/culture for the successful and meaningful inclusion. This places responsibilities on schools to ensure they do not discriminate, but this does not imply that all schools can equally or adequately meet the diverse needs of all children, in the class-room. It is equally important to avoid the inappropriate mainstreaming of children with disabilities, in a way, which neither meets their educational needs nor those of their able bodied classmates. Segregation, in the form of separate schooling and special classes, removes children with disabilities from the regular mainstream educational system. They should be placed in special schools only when the severity or nature is such that education, in regular classes with support services and with the help and use of teaching learning materials and aids, cannot be met and achieved satisfactorily. Although progress has been made, yet an alarming pattern of segregation continues. Children develop a greater respect, trust and understanding for each other, when all children, with and without disabilities, grow, learn and play together. Inclusion will help create a society that understands the needs and requirements and readily accepts children with disabilities, instead of fearing or pitying them. This will lead to a more compassionate, caring, civil and humane society.

Finally, it is only a humane society which is inclusive, compassionate, loving, caring, understanding, democratic and civil, can successfully challenge and break prejudices and negative stereotypes towards “persons with disabilities” and lead to full and complete inclusion.

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