

Comparative perspective of Inclusion: India and England

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is marked by a number of conceptual confusions and contestations. The confusion has arisen through a series of practices that have been concerned with creating certainty and clarity about inclusive education. This paper details the concept of Inclusion in both the countries and challenges/ barriers of Inclusion. It demonstrates about conceptual understandings of Inclusive Education in India and England and journey evolved around Inclusion in both countries. The focus of this article is on the second most populous country in the South, India, and it examines how inclusive education is conceptualized in policy and practice. The article engages with the question, why after a decade the ambiguities encompassing inclusive education persist, with particular reference to Northern hegemony. It concludes by arguing for a contextualized understanding of how education of children with disabilities can take place in India and for a more critical stance towards inclusive education. The paper opens with a brief account of the debates surrounding inclusive education in the North, recent developments in the Indian educational system.

Key Words : Special education, inclusion, Disability, Integration

INTRODUCTION

Defining Inclusion :

Inclusive education “is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners.” For a school to be inclusive, the attitudes of everyone in the school, including administrators, teachers, and other students, are positive towards students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2009).

The term ‘Inclusive Education’ now refers to the education of *all children*, not just those with disabilities. But we should not that the pulse that has forced this change was social and political more than it was educational. The crystallization of political and social movement for equity in the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s brought us to see inclusion

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as being about diversity and social justice just as much as it is about mainstreaming and disability. Since that tectonic shift in thinking about the ethics of separation and exclusion, the idea of inclusion has moved from being seen in a one-dimensional landscape – primarily about disability and difficulty – to a three dimensional terrain that now incorporates a more extensive spectrum of concerns and discourses about the benefits that come from valuing diversity.

As we move more firmly into the twenty-first century, it is time now for ideas and policy about inclusion to move forwards one more, to fold around a range of matters concerning learning community, identity and belonging. Inclusion has to be conceived with many surfaces – disability, certainly, and social justice, no less- but now other facets of life at school: community, social capital, equality and respect.

Concept of Inclusion :

The wave of inclusive education generated by the Salamanca declaration has resulted in it being incorporated into official documents and national policies across the world. The humanideology of inclusive education has appealed globally and it is often described as a global movement (Peters, 2004) with a global agenda (Pijl *et al.*, 1997). However in recent years its ‘global’ status has come under question. Researchers such as Armstrong *et al.* (2011) have argued that the origin and development of the concept of inclusive education is restricted to the North and its entry into the global agenda has been driven by international agencies, raising concerns of it being an export to the South.

Relevance of Inclusion in India :

From the Salamanca statement onwards, to which India is a signatory, the term inclusive education has gained popularity and become part of the official rhetoric within different levels of the Indian educational system (Singal, 2004). In 2005, Singal described the growing visibility of inclusive education in the popular media. This has exploded since then and there has been a manifold increase in the use of the term in printed media, websites, and on television talk shows. In a review of Indian literature on inclusive education Singal (2005) identified the majority of existing literature as commentaries of people working in the field, with little empirical research. Since then there has been an increase in empirical investigations but in comparison to the North it is negligible. Inclusive education as an issue which relates solely to the provision of education for children with disabilities continues to prevail in India (Singal, 2005). Empirical studies highlight this in policy and practice (Singal, 2006) but there is a visible struggle for clarity among researchers. While researchers acknowledge inclusive education is about all children they clearly see a need to focus on disability. Singal (2008) rationalises her disability focus in her study based on how inclusive education is understood in India. However, Giffard-Lindsay (2007) argues that children with disabilities in India are a group that has been neglected and requires attention. In contrast there are others like Julka (2005) and Parasuram (2006) who start by investigating the inclusion of children with disability but recognise the wider focus of inclusive education. Singal’s investigation on inclusive education in India highlighted the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the concept in government policies and among government officials and practitioners (Singal, 2006, 2008).

For instance, integration and inclusion were used interchangeably as if they mean the same. Similarly Julka (2005) found little difference in the understanding and usage of the term integration and inclusive education among practitioners. This fragmented understanding of inclusive education is also visible among the teachers in Hodkinson and Devarakonda's (2009) study which was conducted in a school with a stated policy of inclusion.

Similarly, policy-based research on inclusive education has critiqued the focus in governmental policy on identification of children with disability and the provision of aids and appliances instead of developing services and changing practices within schools and the educational system (Singal, 2006 and Kalyanpur, 2008). Strong critic has also been raised on the government's approach of promoting inclusive education alongside developing special schools (Singal, 2006 and Kalyanpur, 2008). Further, Singal drew on a national level workshop to highlight how inclusive education was not about all children in India but solely about providing access to education for some children with disabilities, who fulfil a range of pre-conditions for mainstream schooling.

These discrepancies have led to inclusive education being referred as an 'elusive concept' (Singal, 2005). Consequently researchers have emphasised the need to develop a contextual understanding of inclusive education reflective of the reality in India (Julka, 2005; Singal, 2006; Kalyanpur, 2008 and Hodkinson and Devarakonda, 2009).

Conceptual understanding of Inclusive Education in India :

Post Salamanca, inclusive education was incorporated in government policies in countries of the North and South. Since then there have been numerous books, articles, and academic debates on the topic but with little representation from the South. The findings of interview data from a larger study conducted in the metropolitan city of Kolkata suggest the term inclusive education is well established in government policies and amongst school heads, special educators, and counsellors. While there is consensus on the 'goodness' of inclusive education and it being synonymous with children with disabilities, there are multiple meanings assigned to inclusive education, inclusive schools, and the includable child. Variations and discrepancies were visible not only between school staff and policy documents but even within policies and schools, respectively.

Today the increasing number of learners from diverse backgrounds entering elementary classrooms has reinforced the importance of making schools more inclusive. With a greater variation in the talents, and social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds of the learners, the elementary classroom in India faces a challenge to use this diversity constructively in order to democratize the teaching-learning processes and practices, and achieve the larger goals of social justice. There has been a further impetus with the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The implementation of this Act will be considered successful only if it addresses the issue of making the children of marginalized communities "visible" within the four walls of the classroom. Many of these children, across the country come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities; ethnic and religious minorities, economically weaker sections (EWS), migrant labourers, nomadic and de-notified tribes, urban poor, children with special needs (CWSN) and so on. Although children of these

communities are enrolled in school, they face the danger of dropping out. Many of them live in extremely vulnerable socio-economic conditions and face a serious threat to their universal rights, such as a school education. From a learner's point of view, RTE, 2009 provides a legal framework to make school admission, attendance and completion compulsory. With physical access taken care of to a greater extent, it is no longer enough to talk merely about provision of universal access. Rather, the growing importance is to make school education free of anxiety, fear and stress for the diverse learners. In this context, the quality of teaching-learning practices and processes has attracted the attention of all the stakeholders of elementary education. A study of schools in Uttar Pradesh by Dreze and Gazdar (1996) reported that teachers refused to touch SC children. They were subjected to verbal abuse and physical punishment by teachers, and were frequently beaten by their upper-caste classmates. Recognizing the complex of issues regarding teacher-based practices the RTE Act, 2009 makes it obligatory to change the general perception of children as passive receivers of knowledge, and to move beyond the convention of using textbooks as the basis of examinations. Going beyond the issue of making elementary education legally compulsory, it talks about the pedagogic factors that prevent learners, especially those belonging to disadvantaged social backgrounds, from a comprehensive and continuous elementary education, in the context of ensuring quality education for all. The Act states that the curriculum should provide for learning through activities, exploration and discovery. It intends to address the pressing issue of teacher-based reforms in the classroom to hold teachers accountable for the violation of a child-friendly environment in the classroom. It also observes that many schools now have large numbers of first-generation learners whose parents cannot provide them direct support in their schooling, and therefore, the pedagogy must be reoriented to meet their schooling needs. In fact, the necessity to address teacher-based practices in the changed circumstances of elementary education in India has been even more strongly emphasized in the recently released National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education. Many interviewees concurred with the opinions reflected in government documents that inclusion is about children with special needs, as reflected by a disabling condition. A handful of others argue that inclusive education should not be limited to children with disabilities, as it holds relevance for all marginalised groups (Singal, 2005a).

Barriers to Inclusive education :

The education system in India has compromised on many levels. We no longer see the child as priority. We have become very conscious of the need to educate our children but it is hardly academic motivation, which generates this interest but rather an economic motivation. Education is largely seen as the route to white collar jobs and this is due to our present education system, which has molded generations to the thinking that all worth is measured in terms of money. Very often the knowledge of the English language becomes the measure of this worth. So, Inclusive Education in India needs must contend with the present system of education, which is provided under the integrated education program for children with mild disabilities in a regular school and the special school for the more severely disabled child under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment implemented through state government and NGO's.

The main problem in implementation is the lack of statistics on the prevalence of intellectual disability. Surveys conducted by NSSO (National Sample Survey) in 2002 and the Census in 2001 show varying figures with the NSSO quoting 1.8% (1.85 crore of the country's population) and the census quoting 2.19% of the population. The large number of children in most schools is another reason since most of our school except the elitist ones have classes where student teacher ratio is anywhere 40 to 60. What passes for education in most free educational institutions offering services to the poor and even in some middle class communities catering to a major chunk of educable children can hardly earn the title of quality. The disparity between elite educational institutions and their poorer counterparts are too glaring even to be mentioned. However, the journey towards inclusive education has begun and is a reality since the mind set of government and the general public by and large has changed.

Legislation and policy related to Inclusion :

The constitution of India does not explicitly include children with disabilities in the provisions made for education, but Article 41 does mention people with disabilities and says in part "the state shall within the limits of its economic development make effective provisions for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness, disablement and in other cases of undesired want". It does not mandate the free and compulsory education as a fundamental right and is merely a directive principle to guide state policy but Article 45 does rectify this by stating that free and compulsory education should be provided for ALL children until they complete the age of 14" The ALL is never specifically explained. But the most recent 93rd amendment to the Indian Constitution passed in December 2001, affirms the Government's commitment to (EFA) or Education for ALL. In Sanskrit it is Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The preamble explicitly states that this includes children with disabilities. This policy aims at all children in the 6 to 14 age group being able to complete eight years of schooling by the year 2010. The SSA gives importance to early childhood care and education and appropriate intervention for children with special needs and also makes special reference to the education of the girl child. The positive factor is the change incorporated in the Education Act by adding a pertinent clause which clarifies that "ALL" includes children with disabilities. On the 21st of March 2005, the Hon. Minister of Human Resource Development in the Rajya Sabha presented a comprehensive statement on the subject of inclusive education of children with disabilities.

RTE (2009) :

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (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. The Act makes education a fundamental right of every child between the ages of 6 and 14 and specifies minimum norms in elementary schools. It requires all private schools (except the minority institutions) to reserve 25% of seats for the poor and other categories of children (to be reimbursed by the state as part of the public-private partnership plan). Children are admitted in to private

schools based on caste-based reservations. It also prohibits all unrecognized schools from practice, and makes provisions for no donation or capitation fees and no interview of the child or parent for admission. The Act also provides that no child shall be held back, expelled, or required to pass a board examination until the completion of elementary education. There is also a provision for special training of school drop-outs to bring them up to par with students of the same age.

Current context :

In the last decade there has been further entrenchment of the inclusive education discourse in India as visible in media, at the level of policy and even among private fee-paying schools who are not obliged to follow government policy. However findings suggest that despite this extensive permeation, the ambiguities surrounding inclusive education persist. Variations in conceptualisation of inclusive education were visible not only between school staff and policy documents, but also between the different policies, even those generated within the same Ministry, as well as within the same policy. This reaffirms the contradictions surrounding inclusive education in India, as highlighted previously by researchers (Julka, 2005; Singal, 2006; Singal, 2008 and Hodkinson and Devarakonda, 2009). Giffard-Lindsay (2007) in a review of inclusive education in India justified these existing inconsistencies by describing inclusive education 'at a very early stage of conceptualization and implementation'. This, though a valid argument when it was still new to the Indian context, is not reflective of the situation today. Since then there is much that has changed; the term is now well anchored in India, as clearly evident in the number of policies that incorporate inclusive education. Nevertheless, certain fundamental discrepancies continue to pervade the inclusive education discourse as reflected in the findings, namely what is inclusive education, who gets included and where. Singal identified some of these concerns in 2005 in a review of the limited Indian literature on inclusive education; clearly the dissonance is more obvious today.

In a prominent Indian journal, Bhattacharya (2010) argues for the relevance of inclusive education in India and states how 'within the Indian context, it is a much abused term and is often rejected too easily without much research'. He goes on to show how the People with Disabilities Act, central disability legislation in India, continues to propagate integration and special schools, neglecting the notion of inclusion. However then instead of making a case for the need for more research on inclusive education in India to help understand the use and effectiveness within the country, he draws on a study conducted in Newham, a borough in London, UK, to show how inclusive programmes with a focus on disability benefit all students.

Evident here is a cross-referring of an idea by comparing India with another country at a completely different stage of educational development, with diversely different issues and priorities and with a wealth of resources. The irony is that Bhattacharya draws on a study conducted not only in a contrasting system and context but also two decades ago, and is silent about the changes in policies that have taken place in the UK in the interim period. Driving the case for inclusive education in India based on Northern literature is nothing new. As early as 1997, a leading scholar Jangira (1997) made a strong argument for inclusive education in India by drawing on the Warnock Report published in the UK, which was strongly embedded in the field of special education and the context of the North.

However in the midst of these claims within India and by international agencies, little consideration is given to the fact that the origin and development of the concept of inclusive education are embedded in the historical, social, educational, political, and economic contexts in the countries of the North (Armstrong *et al.*, 2010) and how these relate to the situation in the countries of the South, like India. This has thus resulted in a one-sided argument that inclusive education is the only way forward when it comes to education of children with disabilities. Nevertheless in the North, critical voices have started questioning the universal dominant status acquired by inclusive education, which perceives mainstream schools as the best place for all children. In the context of the UK, Warnock (2010) critiqued the ideological understanding behind inclusive education, ‘instead of the simplistic ideal of including all children ‘under the same roof’, we should consider the ideal of including all children in the common enterprise of learning’. Similarly, Norwich (2010) argues, ‘there is no place for oversimplified splits or dichotomies too often found in debates over inclusion and should mean the avoidance of the futile pursuit of ideological purity’. This tension is even visible at the government level in the UK, where a new conservative government stated the following in its preliminary document on reform of special educational needs, ‘We will remove the bias towards inclusion and propose to strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose . . . We will also prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools’ (Department of Education, 2011). Educational neocolonialism (Nguyen *et al.*, 2009) or imposing a particular Northern view of education to the South is not unique to children with disabilities but to broader issues in education in general. This is clearly evident in Nguyen *et al.*, (2009,) in-depth critique of how the global agenda of education across the world has been developed by multilateral agencies based in the North. By identifying the narrow educational goals and time-bound targets across the world, multilateral agencies have limited the capacity of countries in the South to determine their own educational agendas, based on the needs within the country. These in turn have played a significant role in shaping what local governments in countries of the South do and international aid agencies priorities.

This is reaffirmed in Kumar’s (2010) criticism of agencies dichotomizing equality of access and quality. He exemplifies how agencies’ short-term goals of access to primary education have determined policy choices in India, at the cost of planning for holistic long-term development to bring about change in the educational system. Further, he argues that even though agencies have shifted their focus from access to quality, it is the norms of the North that are the basis for quality assessment and comparison across countries. Quality has been limited by agencies to something that can be ‘planned, predicted and measured’ or add a certain value (e.g. information and communication technology in the school). This imposed definition of quality neglects again the holistic view of education and quality from the long-term perspective. An explication of Kumar’s critique is evident in Kingdon’s (2007) article on the progress of school education in India, where she identifies quantitative evidence of quality in terms of literacy rates, learning achievement levels, school resources, and teacher inputs, to draw a conclusion of poor quality of schooling in India. Based on the findings from this study one could argue that there is a certain degree of change that has taken place. Not only is government schools supporting children with disabilities but it are even taken up by the fee-paying schools, who, though excluding some, are engaging with children with disability.

While consciousness of responsibility has permeated through, it seems to result merely in repositioning and slight accommodations. The presence of a child with disability in the school seems to have resulted in some modification of the system but these are only surface-level changes; schools are not pushing existing boundaries. However, one cannot negate that within the Indian private school context, these changes themselves are contextually huge, where schools are actually taking the responsibility and not just asking the child to leave. This raises questions – How can schools include children with disabilities?

Similarly in policies ‘how’ children with disabilities can be included in schools is little addressed. Even though policies are ambitious regarding education of children with disabilities, the claims remain at a superficial level without engaging with how it can be achieved within the context of India. Like schools, among policies ‘how’ relates to surface changes like availability of appropriate learning material, aids and appliances, access to alternative forms of communication, an equipped resource room, and appointment of special educators/resource teachers. There is little attention given to teachers’ pedagogical practices; the focus instead is on the special input and preparation for children with disability. Further, while policies mention sensitization, attitudinal change, and training of teachers, there is elusiveness in what these would entail.

This trend is also visible within the academic discourse in India on inclusive education. While there has been a significant amount of discussion on the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of inclusive education, the question of ‘how’ has not been addressed. Existing research does not engage with the school as a whole or enter the classroom to increase our understanding of ‘how’. This neglect within schools, in policy and research, is there as on I argue there is a need to develop a contextualised understanding of how inclusive education can take place in India.

Conclusion:

Since in India inclusive education is evidently about children with disabilities, it is essential to engage with how various disabilities are understood and experienced in the Indian social, political, historical, cultural, and economic contexts, to be able to create contextually appropriate education solutions. However there is an assumption that explanations of disability from the North can be universally transferred to the South, as the medical and charity model in the past, to the current separation of impairment and focus on rights and equalisation of opportunities in the social model (Nguyen *et al.*, 2009). Grech argues how applying this discourse across cultures is problematic as they are products of certain time and space, with possibly little relevance to countries in the South. This issue has also been raised by disability researchers like Ghai (2002) within the Indian context.

As discussed earlier, there is hegemony of inclusive education in mainstream schools as the only possible path forward. There is a need to move beyond this and the dualism of mainstream and special schools that have long dominated our thinking, largely influenced by the North. The emphasis should be on developing appropriate solutions, by adopting a pragmatic and strategic approach, embedded in the realities of India. A first step is fostering creative thinking in reconsidering how and where education can take place for the heterogeneous group of children with disabilities, in a country with wide socio-economic disparities.

Interestingly a related argument has been raised in the context of the UK, where Norwich (2010) has questioned the un-useful and simplified dichotomy between special and regular schools and argues for providing a ‘common enterprise of learning’ irrespective of educational placement and promotes instead ‘hybrid’ types of provision. A similar view has been expressed recently in the Indian context by Singal (to be published), where she promotes ‘fluidity of spaces’ and “‘value-free” transition points’ between different educational settings. Singal (2006) have highlighted the dilemmas surrounding inclusive education in India they do not question how the use of the term might be a hindrance than actually addressing the needs and realities of the context for children with disabilities.

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