



Glitches in the Implementation of Inclusive Education Policy: On-field Observation of Lamgara Block in Almora

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The inclusive education concept is not new to India but has gained prevalence in last decade when the Right to Education (RtE) became a fundamental right. The underlying thought of inclusive education is that every child is treated equally and given a space to realize his/her true potential. It also implies pedagogical practices inside the school where needs of every individual is duly recognized irrespective of the caste, class, ethnic, gender and ability differences.

Though inclusive education policy seems friendly, effective and accommodating with the myriad needs of the differently-abled children, its often lackadaisical implementation presents a disquieting picture on the ground.

This article reflects the loopholes in the government policies, the apathetic and irresponsible attitude of the community and teachers and plummeting motivation level of the special educators which paints a dismal story of the coveted inclusive education policy in the Lamgara block in Almora.

Some on-field observations:

As a part of the Fellowship programme of Azim Premji Foundation, fellows are required to undertake extensive school observations to understand the complexities of the government education system and the pedagogical practices inside the classroom.

During field visits in the Lamgara block of the Almora district, which is one of the widely expanded blocks of Almora, I came across some glaring problems in the operationalisation of the policy for differently-abled children which I would like to highlight in the present article.

Mainstreaming or ghettoisation

Inclusive education connotes bringing differently-abled children into the educational fold and giving them a suitable learning environment as per their needs, whether in the special schools or regular schools. Also, the 'Zero Rejection' policy in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) gives the right to education to every child and backs mainstreaming of such children in the school, but without adequate resource support and individualised educational plans these children are ghettoised in the schools.

In the absence of special school in the Lamgara block many children with special needs are enrolled in the regular schools and are climbing up the classes but with zilch knowledge levels. In one of the school observations, I found a child who cannot even read, write and speak but studying in class IV. In the absence of the pre-integration programmes and inadequate support in the regular schools, mainstreaming remains a mere formality.

Teacher education programmes

Teacher education remains a weak link in providing inclusive environment in the classrooms. In graduate degree and diploma programmes in teacher education there is no specialisation in children of special needs. This shows the inability of the government to understand the criticality of such programmes and the teachers' preparation in this regard.

Equipping regular teachers with the understanding of the needs and requirements of such children assumes importance in the absence of the special schools in Almora. In absence of the proper knowledge and training, regular teachers were found to be involved in the activities which are detrimental to the all-round growth and development of such children. During one of the

observations at the school level, a teacher segregated a differently-abled boy from other children as he was found to be disturbing them during mid-day meal by throwing his meal in their plates. Since he disturbed other children in the classrooms, he sits and works separately. Is segregation the right answer for such problems? There can be no second thought about it that children require empathy and acceptance from the peers, teachers and community. Only then can they flourish.

In-Service teachers training

Teachers Training is one of the essential components under inclusive education policy and the most worrisome feature too. Positive attitude among teachers is essential for successful implementation of the policy at the school level.

The skills and the confidence of the teachers in meeting the diverse challenges in the classrooms and creating a conducive learning environment for children with special needs is a mammoth task which requires adequate resource support to teachers in the form of training, experts' support, etc.

In conversation with Mr. Brijendra Yadav, a hearing-impaired expert and the only resource teacher in Lamgara, I came to know that during his stint of three years, teacher training on inclusive education took place for the first time in the block in 2014. The non-seriousness on the issue by the administration can be gauged by the fact that even after enactment of RtE in 2009 and getting increased support for inclusive education policy, number of trainings are nominal and of shoddy quality.

Negative attitude of the teachers will not prove good to realize the dream of the inclusive teaching-learning processes in the schools. The quality of training can be cited as one of the factors for apathetic attitude of the teachers but most significant is the willingness of the teachers to build understanding on the complex issue of disability, in which trainings can be of great use.

Inadequate resource teachers

Under SSA, every differently-abled child should be placed in the neighbourhood schools with adequate

support services. In the RtE Act, there is a provision of special training for such children, whether residential or non-residential.

Mr. Yadav has to look after 89 differently-abled children which is a herculean task to perform. Looking at the topographical constraints in the hilly areas, sometimes 2- 6 months elapse between visits. Now one can easily understand the kind of educational support such children are receiving and how far it proves to be beneficial to them. It is acknowledged by him that a single teacher is inadequate for these children and being a hearing-impaired expert, children affected with other disorders are not properly taken care of.

Contractual employment of the resource teacher is another major deterrent in empowering differently-abled people. One cannot deny the fact that these children require consistent academic, emotional support from the resource teacher the absence of which can hamper their prospects in gaining social and life skills. In the words of Mr. Brijendra Yadav, whose contract recently got over, "I may come and go but my children are still there who needs me every time. Who will look after them?"

Even the trainers imparting home education to such children are either the parents or educated community members who receive training in DIET (District Institute for Education and Training) once in a year. These training modules of few days are not sufficient enough for a lay-person to comprehend the differently-abled children, and their cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects. In the words of resource teacher Lamgara, 'Home-based education has become more of a means to earn Rs. 500/- month given to them under SSA'.

Non-cooperative parents and community

Disability has a social nature in which families and community play a pivotal role in development of the potential and in shaping the differently-abled child.

All efforts towards inclusive education will be futile if families are not supportive. During talks with Mr. Yadav this point came out strongly as most of the parents of differently-abled children are not willing to attend the awareness sessions conducted by him. They openly said if they get the money in return they

will come. There can be myriad reasons for such nature of the parents, like poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of awareness, etc. In absence of the employment opportunities in the hilly areas, most of the families are involved in daily wage labour and attending a session means losing the day's earning. Also, sometimes out of illiteracy and unawareness the condition of the differently-abled child is misinterpreted as some paranormal condition which can be well treated by the local healers.

Way ahead

There can be no one apt conclusion for such a grave and complex issue but a few propositions may be put forth for the implementation of the policy in letter and spirit in Lamgara block in Almora.

- Running of bridge courses for at least 90 days for such children in a designated place where they can stay and study together. There will be a schedule and curriculum for them to get the maximum benefit out of it.
- Lackluster nature of the trainings can be one of the factors for disinterested attitude of teachers towards it. Instead of conducting trainings within walls trainings can be done on field with such children. It would give the required confidence to teachers to comprehend such children and their requirements.
- Ensure active participation of the parents of such children by including them in the School Management Committees (SMCs) and earmark training sessions on disability issues in SMCs.
- Adequate number of resource teachers and their consistent presence is must for better learning achievements for such children.
- Giving 'Disability Studies' a space in the Teacher Education programmes.

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