

INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM SETTINGS: UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS', PARENTS', AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

RITIKA
CHAWLA

Abstract

Inclusive education has been a big question in India. With the advent of various policies coming into play there has been a push on all schools and classrooms becoming inclusive. There has been a lot of debate in the education space on this as well. This study explores whether the stakeholders - teachers, parents, peer classmates and most importantly students themselves are ready for it. The teachers need to be equipped with both the right mindset and knowledge to manage students in inclusive settings. Both of these need to be developed through deliberate actions. But teachers are unwilling to give up and continue to learn through their experiences.

Introduction

India is a diverse country with the second-largest elementary education system, which tries to reach out to almost 149.4 million children in the age bracket of 6–14 years. Being a country with people belonging to varied backgrounds, it becomes both difficult and important for the government to provide support to the marginalised sections of society. Hence, “inclusive education” was conceptualised to meet this challenge. Inclusion, as explained by the District Primary Education Programme, 2000, is a philosophy of bringing children with special needs well within the purview of mainstream education, recognising that quality education needs to reach everyone through appropriate curricula, teaching strategies, support services, and partnerships with the community (Kumar and Kumar 2007). This definition as well as the scheme of inclusive education was further enhanced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 2003, with inclusion being defined as covering all learners, i.e., young people with or without

Ritika is currently the Curriculum Head for India School Leadership Institute (ISLI). She has also worked with school leaders as Delhi City Head under the ISLI National Fellowship as a Programme Manager. Prior to this, she was studying towards an MA in Education degree at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She completed her Teach for India fellowship in 2012 and has taught grades two and three in a municipal school in Mumbai. She has also worked as a Business Analyst with different organisations and as a happiness consultant with Oye Happy planning surprises. Ritika has a BBA and PGDHRM from Symbiosis International University. Apart from work, she enjoys traveling, writing, reading, watching movies and surprising people.

disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary preschool provision, schools, and community educational settings with appropriate networks of support services (Singal, 2005). In a lay person's understanding, inclusion means having children in mainstream schools, irrespective of their socio-economic background, physical or mental disability, and learning difficulty.

Since education is recognised as a catalyst for social change and bringing about social equality and justice, there have been many processes, policies, acts, provisions, etc., that the Indian government has taken up in order to ensure the participation of disadvantaged groups. As mentioned, so far, a number of policies and provisions have been made to translate the ideals of inclusive education into practice such as the Kothari Commission Report (1966), the National Policy of Education (1986), the Persons with Disability Act (1995), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act (2009), and the Disability Bill (2012). Even at the international level, there have been policies and legislations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Salamanca Declaration (1994) and No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which are aimed at developing an understanding of the historical and current position of inclusive education, both in the national and international contexts.

Inclusion-related discussions underscore the urgency for Indian policymakers as well as educational practitioners to consider the historical shifts experienced by the indigenous and traditional education systems in India in developing education-specific initiatives towards improving basic education. Today, the Right to Education (RTE) Act has made it mandatory for schools to admit children with disabilities and those from low socio-economic backgrounds under the 25% inclusion quota for disadvantaged groups. A 2012 amendment to the Act expanded the definition of disability to include autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and multiple disabilities. While there has been a lot of theoretical work on inclusion in India, the support provided in practice has not been the same. Moreover, the prime stakeholders for ensuring the implementation of inclusion have not been identified or well supported by any of the schemes provided by the government.

For the purpose of this study, we included the following children when referring to inclusion—children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); those with physical disabilities; and “normal”¹ children, i.e., those other than the ones mentioned. A child who is “different” due to cognitive, physical, or economic

reasons is likely to be discriminated against or differentiated by teachers, peers, and parents of peers. Socio-economic backgrounds are also linked to disadvantages and advantages faced by children. Therefore, participants in inclusive processes include children with disabilities or learning difficulties and low socio-economic backgrounds, parents, teachers, peers, administrators, resource teachers, and the community. This study explores the roles and responsibilities of these participants along with understanding their interaction with one another in an inclusive setting.

Many educationists believe that putting children with special needs and low socio-economic backgrounds in mainstream schools can benefit everyone—other students, teachers, parents, and the government. However, there is no guarantee that the outcome will always be positive. It is quite likely that children from low socio-economic backgrounds and those with special needs as well as their peers in school might not be equipped to handle the situation. Peers in school play an important role in the lives of the children with disabilities. Children with disabilities often become easy targets of teasing and bullying by their non-disabled peers as reported by children interviewed in certain studies. Some schools are reluctant to take pupils with special needs because of various reasons. If schools find it difficult to accommodate such students, so do the students themselves. Practitioners and teachers face many challenges in creating an inclusive environment in a regular school setting.

So what is it that can make an inclusive approach work? Training support for teachers to develop new skills, specially designed curricula, extra help for students with special needs, workshops for other students, awareness campaign for parents, and active interaction between parents and teachers are some steps that certain schools have taken. This study was undertaken to find out whether inclusive approaches improve the quality of education and the behaviour of all those involved. It was conducted primarily with the objective of understanding the mindsets and attitude of parents, teachers, children with special needs (CWSN), and their peers. Hence the questions probed into were:

- How do the attitudes and mindsets of teachers, peers, and parents impact students?
- What are the ways in which teachers as well as parents deal with these issues and respond to these children and their problems?

Context

The study was conducted in Aksharnandan School, Pune, which has children from preschool to grade 10, and follows the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) curriculum along with that of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) for CWSN. It has children from low-, middle-, and high- income groups, as well as those with learning difficulties and physical disabilities in one classroom setting. The school supports all children on a case-to-case basis and provides special educators and one-on-one teaching. The school is primarily Marathi medium and children are taught English and Hindi as second and third languages.

The school has been following the policy of inclusion ever since its inception, with 10% children in every classroom being those with physical or mental disabilities or from low socio-economic classes. While all children are in the “mainstream” classroom for most of the day, those with special needs are part of parallel classes, which provide them extra support in English and mathematics. The mainstream classroom has a student–teacher ratio of 40:1, while the parallel class has a ratio of about 8:1. For this school, CWSN included those with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder (ADD), ADHD, dyslexia, Down syndrome, Asperger syndrome, hearing impairment, moderate visual impairment, and mild autism.

Other than Aksharnandan, I also visited two inclusive schools in Mumbai called Beacon High and Precious School. Beacon High caters to children with cognitive challenges and learning difficulties along with those who have visual impairment, belonging to high-economic backgrounds. This school has 30 students in each class including about six–eight with special needs. Precious School admits all those children who are rejected by mainstream schools and have an IQ above 65. It has about six–seven students per class. Both these schools are English medium and have special educators for additional support.

Methodology

The study was carried out for a period of six weeks in the inclusive schools mentioned earlier. It was based on non-participatory classroom observations, interviews of various stakeholders, and a survey.

Before deciding the tool, as a researcher, I went through past studies done in this area. Some of the key findings of these studies are as follows:

- Equal opportunities for children with special needs to communicate with and learn alongside their peers are not facilitated simply by inclusion in the same classroom, as access does not automatically deliver equality (Singal 2005).
- Disabled children tend to be framed by discourses of “normality” and “difference” in school, arising from institutional factors and everyday cultural practices (Singh and Ghai 2009).
- Disability is experienced most acutely in the domain of relationships with the non-disabled (ibid.).
- Educators and teachers tend to have discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities (Hodkinson and Devarakonda 2009).

An in-depth literature review helped me to decide on the methodology and tools for the study.

The methodology used was a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools. Since the research was based on understanding human behaviour, thoughts and feelings located in a certain context, these could not be completely quantified. The interviews were semi-structured as they were discussion-oriented or conversation-based, and the questions were not quantifiable or close ended. These interviews helped in an understanding of the beliefs, feelings, and level of awareness of parents, teachers, principals, special educators, and students, pertaining to children under inclusion, and hence were descriptive and inferential.

Moreover, given the sensitivity of the subject matter, face-to-face interviewing was needed in order to avoid any misunderstandings or misconceptions about the purpose of the study and data collection. The observations conducted were non-participatory for classrooms of grade 6, 7 and 8 (both regular and parallel classes) in particular and the school in general.

The quantitative aspect of the study was based on Keith Cochran `s Survey called STATIC (Scale of Teachers` Attitudes towards Inclusion). The STATIC tests the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive education, professional and philosophical issues regarding inclusive education, and logistical concerns of inclusive education (Cochran 1997). This was conducted with certain modifications to make it relevant to the context of Aksharnandan School. The sample for the survey included 35 full-time and part-time teachers.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis provided in this section is through the triangulation of data collected through observations, interviews, and the survey because it was important to really see if peoples' perspectives and actions go together and analyse any discrepancies.

What Teachers Think and Feel

The teachers at Aksharnandan at the glance seem and sound pro-inclusion. They believe in the school's ideology, and this percolates in their actions as well. More than 75% teachers felt they could teach CWSN and did feel frustrated while dealing with them. The feelings of guilt and frustration increased when they were not able to reach out to all children; yet, they did not feel anxious, despite lacking any formal training to manage them. Their positive attitude was evident in the classroom when they did their best to reach out to as many students through activities and discussion-based teaching pedagogy. They shared a special relationship with their students and had a soft corner for CWSN. Even the school staff was aware of the problems CWSN were dealing with and dealt with them more sensitively.

The teachers were also of the opinion that all children can learn in the same classroom and progress academically, and they felt they could manage children with moderate physical challenges as well. A little deviation was found in the question of whether CWSN should be placed in special schools, and about 66% teachers agreed but provided the explanation that this should be in the case of children with high levels of physical and cognitive challenges such as autism and auditory challenges. According to them, children with more than moderate challenges only acquire social skills from "normal" students in mainstream classrooms, but academically they do get left behind. Moreover, they felt that inclusion had repercussions post class five –six, as the children developed identities and became aware of the differences. Yet, they felt this could be overcome to a certain extent with interventions for both "normal" and "special" children, making them both aware of their behaviour.

A major need felt by 70% of the teachers was that of training. They felt that both pre-service and in-service training played an important role in the teachers' work. Another gap was found in the infrastructure. Large classroom sizes and inaccessibility to teaching-learning materials (TLMs) and other resources made teachers feel handicapped.

Both the survey and the interviews indicated that the vision and attitude of the

principal of the school made a huge difference in the way teachers functioned in schools. More than 90% teachers felt that they were given freedom and support by the principal in their teaching practices. Another support system for the teachers was their peers. Talking and sharing led to generation of better ideas and also a feeling that they were not alone.

Even though teachers aim at ensuring that all students learn and show progress, they do need additional support in their daily pedagogic practices. Their pedagogic techniques were based on a trial and error approach rather than a rooted research. What has made their task a little easy is having a different evaluation framework such as continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE). This allowed them to focus on the strengths of every child rather than having the same test or exam for all. Even the assessment or the question papers were different, with the children in parallel classes being given an easier paper as compared to the regular class.

Another aspect of inclusion that teachers dealt with was parents. The teachers expressed their distress when parents did not accept that their child required additional support. There were instances when parents did not accept for a long time that their child was any different from the other students in the school. The teachers felt it was important for parents to lower their expectations academically but treat their children just the same otherwise.

What Parents Feel and Believe

The information collected was both from parents of CWSN and those of their peers. None of the parents were against inclusion, and they were staunch supporters of this approach irrespective of where other students came from or how it impacted their child. During the admission process, the school has a questionnaire that notes parents' views on inclusion and related subjects. The school does not accept those parents who are against inclusion. Further filtration takes place during the interview process, allowing admission to only those students whose parents are absolutely accepting of having their child study in a diverse classroom.

Still, there is a need for counseling parents. It is difficult for them to believe that their child is unlike other "normal" children and at times even evidence such as psychological tests and low exam scores does not suffice. Being biased due to my past learnings as a teacher, I always thought that it would be difficult to explain things to illiterate parents. However, during the course of the study, I discovered that the educational background of the parents was not linked to their acceptance of their child's situation.

An example that I encountered was of Sneha, whose mother was an educated professional. Despite her daughter having Down Syndrome and an IQ as low as 68, Sneha's mother still expected her to appear for the SSC board exams. To quote her mother, "She does everything like all other children, so she will also give exams like all of them. Why will she give NIOS when her IQ is okay?" This comparison of Sneha with her peers can put the child under a lot of pressure.

Counseling and regular communication with teachers and the principal could help in such situations. Parents also need a lot of support from the school, just as the child does.

What Peers Think and Do

As mentioned before, the school provides additional support to CWSN through parallel classes. Even children who are struggling with mathematics and English due to other reasons are part of these classes. Though most children said that parallel classes are helpful, those who have never been part of these classes prefer not to be sent there. But there was no evident discrimination in making a child part of these parallel classes.

The peers seemed accepting of CWSN, especially if they were part of their class from early years such as kindergarten or grade 1. Having grown together, peers even understand the emotional needs of CWSN. Let's take the example of Rishabh, who was partially hearing impaired and needed a hearing aid. Rishabh had friends who understood him and could easily interpret his words and were sensitive towards him. He was part of their team in sports and class projects. His impairment did not matter to them as they had grown used to it. But there were other instances that showed that children did discriminate, even if it was not intentional. Sneha, about whom I mentioned before, sat alone during lunch hour every day and was not part of any team during sports. On talking to her peers, I found out that even when they tried getting close to her, she became uncomfortable and kept away. Hence, shades of subtle discrimination could be seen.

What CWSN Feel and Know

Sonal has a learning disability and retention problem. During group projects, she is given the "easiest" task of collecting pictures. She realises that her classmates think that she is "not good enough" to do anything else. But she also knows that she is a good dancer, and when it comes to co-curricular activities, she will be taken as part of the group. Yet, these subtle forms of

discrimination hurt her, and she does not share her feelings with her parents or teachers as she feels they might worry too much. Also, though the parallel class with fewer students has helped her build a special bond with her English teacher, she stills vies to be in the regular class.

For children like Sonal, being part of inclusive settings is tough, while for children like Sneha, it becomes even worse because their disability gets more clearly visible. Being treated as an equal by schoolteachers and the school staff or being handled with more sensitivity such as being made to participate in the school annual day does not address what these children go through on a daily basis.

The principal mentioned that the school does intervene when they feel that a child is being discriminated against by his/her peers and teachers hold discussions in classes to address such issues. The principal also mentioned that while children without special needs do return to the school and feel gratitude for having been exposed an inclusive setting, those with special needs never come back and share if they had a good time during their schooling.

Conclusion

The debate on inclusive education is never-ending. We are yet to define what inclusion really means. Who decides what inclusion is? Who should be included and who should be excluded? Is it about children being marginalised due to their socio-economic background, cognitive challenges, physical challenges, or something else? As mentioned earlier, there are various policies existing, but their implementation is not carried out as expected. Most teachers and parents that I spoke with felt that policymakers should see what is happening at the ground level instead of taking a top-down approach. Large classroom sizes are making it difficult for schools to manage inclusion, and this is hampering the progress of both the CWSN and their peers. An ideal student–teacher ratio for having inclusion would be 10:1. Additionally, NIOS should also be given more weightage for college admissions compared to SSC board results, so that children are not pressurised into giving SSC exams only.

Teachers felt that they lacked sufficient training and that if they knew how to work with CWSN, it would benefit other students as well. Both pre-service training during a Bachelor of Education (BEd) and in-service training would add to both their knowledge and teaching practices. This would also help them to strike a balance between supporting CWSN and letting them

become independent rather than being over-sympathetic towards them. Moreover, teachers feel that they themselves have to figure out teaching-learning materials for CWSN rather than just using those that are already easily accessible or available.

Parents and peers are an important aspect of inclusive education. Parents of both CWSN and their peers need to be oriented and sensitised towards the needs of CWSN. Having counselors and special educators should be mandatory for all schools, and if there is a dearth of them, then schools should tie up with non-governmental organisations or other schools in the vicinity to ensure that their students receive additional support both inside and outside school boundaries.

Even with all these suggestions, there are certain questions we need to continuously engage with. Is it a good idea to have inclusion, i.e., children with learning difficulties, low socio-economic backgrounds, and physical disabilities, all in one classroom? What are the biggest barriers to inclusion? What types of interventions are needed? Where do you draw the line between being supportive and making the child dependent? For children such as Sneha, Sonal, or Rishabh, scoring even a 60% in the SSC is quite ambitious, and this will not necessarily ensure them admission in a good college or enable them to do what all their other classmates will do once they pass out. So will they not be excluded once again from the mainstream education system? Do children like them really have a great childhood by being locationally included but socially excluded? Are we really ready for inclusion as a society? Would we be fine with having “teachers with special needs” in our schools?

After talking to teachers, parents, principals, special educators, counselors and other experts, as well as children, I have come to understand that children with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities can be part of mainstream classrooms, even though they would need a lot of support. Children with moderate to high challenges would, however, need special care and attention, and if they are part of a mainstream classroom, they might not only burden their teachers and peers but also not benefit from being part of the mainstream. Hence, for special cases, we do need to have special education. This special education can be provided within the mainstream school system so as to help CWSN to socialise with the “real” world rather than staying protected all their lives.

I would like to conclude by saying what one of the teachers told me during an interview: “There are practical issues for inclusion or even integration, but we are not ready to give up.” With this positive attitude and mindset, there

is hope that inclusion will benefit all involved, if not today, then maybe at a later stage. After all, schools and society are a reflection of each other, and to change one, the other needs to change as well.

End Notes

¹ “Normal” refers to neurotypical children since that is the word generally used by schools in different communications.

References

- Cochran, H K (1997): “The Development and Psychometric Analysis of the Scale of Teachers` Attitudes Inclusion”, Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
- Hodkinson, A and C Devarakonda (2009): “Conceptions of Inclusion and Inclusive Education: A Critical Examination of the Perspectives and of Teachers in India”, *Research in Education*, 82: 85–99.
- Kumar, S and K Kumar (2007): “Inclusive Education in India”, *The Electronic Journal of Inclusive Education*, Wright State University; 2(2): 1–16.
- Singal, N (2005a): “Responding to Difference: Policies to Support ‘Inclusive Education` in India”, paper presented at the Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress 2005, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.
- Singh, V and A Ghai (2009): “Notions of Self: Lived Realities of Children with Disabilities”, *Disability and Society*, 24(2): 129–45.

