

Inclusive Education: Issues and Challenges

Anuradha Naidu



Abstract

Inclusive Education is a relatively new concept, having gained international attention in 2000, following the Education for All campaign. In India, the 86th Constitutional Amendment guarantees education as a fundamental right to all and this includes the child with a disability. The subsequent enactment of two progressive legislative initiatives - the Right to Education Act and The Rights of Persons with Disability Act - reflects a policy shift from a welfare-based approach to one that emphasises human rights. However, Disability Rights activists draw attention to the sobering reality that, despite enrolment, children with a disability are invisible in the classroom. The three cases studies presented in the essay demonstrate that children fall through the cracks of a fragmented system, despite laws recognising disability as an element of human diversity. Some of the critical aspects of the objective of attaining quality of learning are differentiated curriculum, pedagogical innovation, examination reform and, most of all, teacher preparation. A culture of collaboration and dialogue among all stakeholders - teachers, special educators, administrators, families and persons with disability is urgently needed to eliminate social barriers and enable a Whole School Development approach to support Inclusion for all children.

“To strive to give something back to society in a spirit of gratitude is the proper way for human beings to live.”

*- Japanese Buddhist philosopher
Daisaku Ikeda*

Introduction

Inclusive Education is a relatively new concept in the Indian subcontinent, which has been grappling with the enrolment of children into the school system. The last decade saw a shift in perspective in respect of the education of children with disability - from an approach that emphasises welfare to

one that emphasises human rights, following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD) by the Indian Government. Both the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act), 2009 and the Rights of Persons With Disabilities Act (RPWD Act), 2016, make provisions for Inclusive Education. But with retention and school dropout becoming serious issues, will this progressive vision translate into good practices in schools?

In encouraging and supporting human diversity in the classroom, schools build on humanistic aspects of life, which lay the foundation for the acceptance of differences. Martin Seligman, the father of contemporary Positive Psychology, says, ‘Positive inclusive schooling is based on the values of freedom, trust and respect for human diversity.’ Tony Booth, author of Index for Inclusion, also emphasises the role of values in the democratic and participatory practice of Inclusion, which recognises teachers and learners equally. Are teachers today prepared in the basic practices of curriculum adaptation, collaborative skills and Universal Design to build a new inclusive school culture?

As a Special Educator trained in the 1990s during the run-up to the World Education Forum, Dakar, 2000, I was thrilled to discover the global interest in Inclusive Education. The idea of the child with disability going to mainstream schools, along with other children marginalised by poverty, gender and cultural factors, was gaining momentum. My first encounter with Inclusive Education was through a four-nation field project on the Index for Inclusion involving India, Brazil, South Africa and the UK. Since then, my idea of Inclusive Education has become aligned with the philosophy of the Index, which is: all students and staff have to be valued, and all efforts made to increase their participation and collaboration in school communities. It is about the teacher, the student and the community coming together to lower barriers and increase access to learning. Inclusive Education is about Whole School Development.

Inclusive Education and legislation: Then and Now

The inclusion of the education of children with disability in the 'Education for All' goals was followed by the 86th Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 2002. Article 21-A of the Constitution guarantees education as a fundamental right and specifies that the state shall provide free and compulsory education for all children in the 6-14 years age group, although it was not until 2009 that the RTE Act was passed by Parliament. For the first time, the Act made it mandatory to include children with disability in the mainstream educational system.

During the same decade, the Indian Government also ratified UNCRPD-2007. Subsequently, the RPWD Act, 2016 came into force, replacing the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (PWD Act), 1995.

In this article, we will review the sections relating to Inclusive Education in these legislative initiatives, as well as reflect on the implications for the quality of learning.

- First, let us look at the RTE Act from the perspective of Inclusive Education, disability and access to quality education.
- Next, we will look at the RPWD Act, its alignment with the UNCRPD and new definitions of disability that incorporate environmental barriers.
- Finally, reading the Acts together, we will consider the UNCRPD concept of Universal Design to make schools inclusive.

The RTE Act

The 'right to education' implies diversity in education. The RTE Act is built on the premise that all children should be in school. Alongside school enrolment supported by a 'Zero Rejection Policy', the Act provides for improvement in school quality through appropriate teacher training, barrier-free infrastructure and improved pedagogical and curricular adaptations. Finally, the RTE Act makes it obligatory for the state to monitor school bodies, and improve their governance and school development plans.

The story of Fatima, from Chennai, as narrated by her mother, a housewife from a coastal town in southern Tamil Nadu, illustrates the challenges in the implementation of the RTE Act. Fatima, 8, was excited at the prospect of being admitted, after a long wait, to a 'good' school. Following

the enactment of the RTE, Fatima was eligible to join any school in her neighbourhood. However, on admission she was placed in a special unit and was to remain there till she had gained mastery over the English and Tamil alphabets. Fatima had been misdiagnosed with mental retardation when she was 5. As she grew older, it became clearer that she had developmental coordination disorder, which made writing a huge challenge. She had an impressive fund of general knowledge, but with her dysgraphia, writing was near-impossible. The barriers she encountered were attitudinal: the school authorities just could not understand how a child would get through school without being able to write.

Under the RTE, a child like Fatima, between the ages of 6 and 14 years, has a right to be admitted into a neighbourhood school to access free and compulsory education. The Act defines a 'child' to include children from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, children facing disadvantages from social, economic, gender and religious factors, and, lastly, children with disability. Under the new law, Fatima has been enrolled at a school about a kilometre away from her home.

Another positive feature of the RTE Act is its emphasis on 'Access to Quality Education'. It reflects a shift in focus from a welfare approach to a rights-based approach and makes it a legal obligation for the State to ensure that a child is in a state-recognised school. The guiding principles of the Act also go beyond enrolment to provision of quality of learning.

- Under Section 19, a child is entitled to 'full-time education of equitable quality in a formal school satisfying essential Norms and Standards.'
- The Norms and Standards of the RTE make barrier-free access to class material, classrooms and buildings mandatory.

'Access to Quality Education' implies the creation of environments that enable a child to evolve and grow to full potential. Fatima had encountered traditional social barriers right at the doorstep. Overcoming this requires educational reform and progressive leadership that encourages learning and participation for all.

RTE and the challenges ahead

Under Section 12(1) (c) of the RTE Act, 25 percent of seats in private schools are reserved for children from disadvantaged sections of society. Fatima secured admission in her neighbourhood

school, but could she progress from the special unit to the regular classroom? Section 21 of the RTE Act invests the mandatory School Management Committee with the responsibility to create a school development plan. If the curriculum is truly child-centred and child-friendly, as the Act claims it will be and if the environment is free of fear, anxiety and trauma, Fatima can learn along with her peers, irrespective of her inability to write.

The website of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has links to documents on 'learning outcomes' for elementary schools, a guidebook on index to inclusion, and suggestions for 'accommodation and modifications' in assessment. Does this mean the Quality of Education issue is closer to being addressed? A KPMG evaluation report in 2016, on the achievements of the RTE six years following the enactment, highlights the challenges in the debate over quality of learning. The Head of KPMG's Education Sector points out that the government has so far focussed on universal enrolment and infrastructure development, but now the focus should be on quality of learning. According to the Annual Status of Education report for 2014, 50 per cent of Class 5 students and 25 per cent of Class 8 students are unable to read a Grade 2 reader. Similar statistics on learning outcomes in numeracy point out that pedagogy and teacher-student interactions that encourage learning through understanding and application are needed.

The RPWD Act, 2016

The passage of the RPWD Act, 2016 to replace the PWD Act was a special moment in the history of the disability rights movement. Activists with disability played an important role as stakeholders invested in facilitating social change and claimed their movement was entering a new phase. The fact that the new law is UNCRPD-compliant is transformative in its philosophical underpinnings and shifts the focus from social welfare to human rights. Unlike the PWD Act, the preamble of the RPWD Act lays down the 'principles of empowerment of persons with disability'. These are:

- respect for inherent dignity
- respect for difference and acceptance of PWD as part of human diversity and humanity
- access and equal opportunity, and
- disability as an evolving and dynamic concept. (That concept is based on the assumptions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children,

where adults take into account the children's capacity to exercise their rights.)

Basic provisions and implementation measures

Unlike the PWD Act, 1995, the RPWD Act, 2009 provides for Inclusive Education, which it defines as 'a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disability.' It also elaborates the basic requirements and the means of implementation.

An important development under the purview of the RPWD Act, which has tremendous significance for formal schools, is the inclusion of 21 different types of disability, fourteen more than the original seven in the PWD Act. For the first time, children with autism, specific learning disability and speech and language disability qualify for Inclusive Education.

Sajan, 6, was diagnosed with a pervasive developmental disorder (a disorder associated with social, language and communication skills) when he was 3 years old. Sajan is a reluctant learner who struggles to transition to school every day. His mother's conversation with his teacher showed that he is unable to sit for more than five minutes in class and is a social isolate, making him vulnerable to bullying. The teacher gives him daily homework to improve his writing and numeracy skills to enable him to meet the achievements standards of his class. This has increased stress levels at home. Sajan loves to draw, play with building blocks, creating amazing building designs and play on the climbing frame and slide. However, such opportunities to learn by doing will shrink if the school authorities continue to follow a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

From an Inclusive Education perspective, Sajan and children like him add another dimension to classroom diversity, one which teachers are ill-prepared for. Early detection is also a recognised part of the school system, a progressive step considering that childhood disabilities go undetected in the early years. Sajan and others like him will benefit from early intervention and plenty of encouragement. Sadly, they end up as school dropouts, given the problems they encounter. In the new Act, the basic requirements of attenders, transportation, physical and communication barriers will all be considered as a form of reasonable accommodation. With curricular adaptation, Sajan could learn to develop his attention span using the activities he loves,

working on the same learning outcomes as the rest of the class. He might require a teaching assistant's supervision to help him, for example, make friends or complete a puzzle in time. All these are now listed as interventions in the Act in Sections 17 and 18 under the 'duties of educational institutions' and 'specific measures to promote inclusive education'.

The RPWD Act additionally introduces the notion of 'barriers' in its definition of disability. As the UNCRPD emphasises, the problem of disability lies not in the person but in the 'barriers' imposed by the environment. In Sajan's case, the expectation to sit for a longer duration needs to be modified as he is not neurologically ready. His teacher needs to give him activities that include play in learning, shorter-duration tasks and tangible appreciation for achievement. To improve his participation in class, she has to eliminate the environmental, attitudinal and communicational factors that isolate and exclude and enhance those that give rise to hope and optimism.

Therefore, administrators and teachers can spell out the 'Reasonable Accommodations', that is, the adjustments or modifications in the curriculum or school environment in their Inclusive School Development Plan. This will set the precedent for inclusion of children like Sajan. Some of the examples that will within the framework of the Act as 'Reasonable Accommodations for inclusive school development are:

- transportation for child with high support needs and attendants
- Accessible buildings, campuses, toilets and other facilities
- Pedagogical support for children with learning disability
- Individualised support to maximise academic and social development
- Modified textbooks: for example, the Barkha Series, a supplementary graded reader services published by NCERT
- Alternative and Augmentative Communication systems for children with speech and language impairments
- Modifications in the examination system: extra time, use of computers, scribes

The most progressive feature of the RPWD Act is the 'Universal Design' concept promoted by the UNCRPD. 'Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to

the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design' (Mace, 1988). In schools, this translates to creating flexible learning environments that are inclusive of all learners with diverse learning profiles and needs. Sajan can grow up in a joyful learning environment if the same teaching-learning methods are accessible to him and all the other students in the class. Hence the onus lies on each educator to understand the nature of diversity in her classroom. Teacher self-reflection goes a long way to create a nurturing classroom.

Some examples of Universal Design Classroom interventions that can benefit all learners

- Access: ramps, seating, transport, electronic books
- Participation: visual schedules, illustrated vocabulary, working with partners, project work, work experience, outdoor sports, visual and performing arts
- Modes of expression: written, verbal responses, art, drama, multimedia presentations

How do the RTE Act and the RPWD Act work together?

This section explores the links between the RTE Act and the RPWD Act from two different points of view. First, through the macro viewpoint of disability rights advocates, who are concerned about the older welfare attitude influencing national programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhayan (SSA). Second, through the case study of Kanika (below), listing the practical aspects of inclusion.

Education of Children with Disability: Historical Entrenchment in Welfare

Even in 2001, when the Constitution was amended to guarantee the fundamental right to education for all, the education of children with disabilities was perceived as a subject of state welfare. This systemic entrenchment in welfare has resulted in the preservation of segregated services even within the flagship programme for the Education For All Campaign, the SSA. Disability rights activists are concerned that children with high support needs are enrolled in school, but end up in home-based programs under the SSA. This goes against the spirit of the RTE Act.

The concept of 'evolving capacities' faces a similar fate for children with benchmark disability with high support needs (with 40 per cent disability) who require intensive support to carry out daily

activities. Disability rights activists ask if social barriers are being overlooked. 'We slot people at a particular level based on our understanding of the person's impairment. This will not lead to respecting the evolving capacity of the individual, because we don't focus on the factors that restrict the development of the person in the given environment,' says disability rights activist Meenakshi Balasubramanian, Coordinator Projects, Equals: Centre for Promotion of Social Justice.

Disability certificates, which are issued by medical professionals, are irrelevant for admission in schools: the emphasis should be on educational assessments. According to Dipti Bhatia, Deputy Director of Vidya Sagar, a disability resource centre, 'assessments should be done at the time of admission to get the environment ready for the child rather than getting the child ready for the environment.' She notes that the examination system must also evolve. The RTE mentions quality of learning based on child-centred and activity-based curriculum, and assessment methods must also reflect the change.

Whole School Approach

Kanika's story illustrates the role a school can play in the inclusion of a child with benchmark disability with high support needs. Born premature, Kanika was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth. She achieved her development milestones (with a two-year delay) with intensive physical and speech therapies. At age 6, she was admitted to Standard 1 of her neighbourhood school; she is now in Standard 3. Given the school's progressive history, curricular accommodations such as use of teaching assistants, reduced portions, extra time for writing are part of the class routine. Kanika participates along with all her classmates in art, dance and drama activities and is perceived as a student who succeeds in school.

To encourage more students with high support needs like Kanika, schools need to create a collaborative culture supporting diversity. Here are some ideas to encourage inclusive schooling:

- assess schools using tools like the Index for Inclusion

- create opportunities for teachers, administrative staff, the school community to interact with persons with disabilities
- frame guidelines for collaboration between teachers, special educators and teaching assistants
- develop training programs promoting collaborative teamwork
- allocate resources for assistive technology and communication
- collaborate with disability resource centres to support mainstream schools
- conduct access audits of the school environment
- train teachers through pre-service and in-service programs in differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, curricular accommodations
- encourage co-teaching in the inclusive classroom
- encourage teachers to meet regularly to discuss best practices
- adapt curriculums and assessment techniques. Use electronic portfolio
- involve parents of children with disability

Conclusion

Collaboration is the cornerstone of Inclusive Education. It is a process and not an end product of a series of interventions. Dialogue and self-reflection within the school community will lead to a better understanding of the implementation process. Children with disabilities have the same need to belong as all children do. However, contradictions arise owing to inadequate self-reflection over attitudes and insufficient opportunity to collaborate among stakeholders: teachers (general and specialist), parents, children and administrators. Respectful dialogue through a participatory engagement that helps to develop sensitised personnel, differentiated instructional strategies, modes of alternative communication, active involvement of parents and the community and an administration committed to the advancement of inclusive education is critical.

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Anuradha, until recently, worked in Hong Kong as an Early Interventionist with children with special needs in the 0-6 age group, under the auspices of an early education centre sub-vented by the Hong Kong Government program serving the non-Chinese-speaking population. She trained as a special educator at Vidya Sagar, Chennai, 20 years ago and was introduced to the trans-disciplinary approach there. Her practice has evolved to reflect this as she constantly strives to weave together therapy, education, and alternative communication into a fun-filled process of learning for her students. She can be contacted at anuradha.naidu@gmail.com