



# Preparing Teachers for Social Justice - An Experience in Karnataka

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Teacher preparation can be a “dynamic vehicle” in the cause of promoting social justice (Hansen, 2008). Social justice may be a philosophically contested and normative concept (Goodlad, 2002). But then to Rawls “justice is the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls, 1971; p.3). Also Novak (2000) argues that social justice is a virtue ascribed to the “reflective and deliberative acts” of individuals (quoted in Grant & Agosto, 2008; p.98).

In a stratified society based on vertical hierarchies such as ours, teacher education offers a glimmer of hope by means of engaging prospective teachers in critically reflecting on issues of discrimination and consciously attempting to adapt inclusive pedagogies. Hitherto, schooling has been a factor in perpetuating inequities with not only a wide variety of schools, of differing qualities, catering to children from different classes but also insensitive pedagogies and ill thought out curricula (Kumar 1989; Nambissan & Rao, 2013 ).

The Right of children to free and compulsory Education Act, 2009 is an attempt to ensure that every child (at least in the age group of 6-14 years) receives ‘quality’ education, with the parameters of quality spelt out. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 and the related position papers (NCERT, 2005) have widened the discourse on curricular issues and more importantly the stress on meaning making places the onus on teachers to ensure that every child in her class is able to

meaningfully process the schooling experiences.<sup>2</sup> The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCTE,2009) provides pointers for preparing teachers to don this role.

The revised Diploma in Education (D.Ed.) Curriculum of Karnataka has attempted to spell out the vision of NCFTE, 2009 by means of introducing inclusive education as a permeating philosophy across the curriculum. Inclusive education is conceived from a wider perspective of social justice. According to UNESCO (2008), inclusive education is a process of strengthening the ability of the schooling system to cater to the needs of every child. Rather than children adapting to schools, the system (of which teachers form a crucial part) has to transform to meet children’s needs.

This article briefly outlines what went into the curriculum and the associated materials, and shares the experiences gained from piloting the materials with a small group of student teachers.

## Curriculum and material development on inclusive education for the D.Ed. programme

“Laws, polices and rules are created to serve a liberal ideology but planted and left to grow in a culture opposed to egalitarian ethos they subscribe to” (Juneja,2011;p.165). Hence the challenge was to translate the egalitarian aspirations of the recent laws and policies, including NCFTE 2009 vision of teacher education, into ground reality.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Ruma Banerjee for convincing me to get involved in inclusive education and for sustained partnership in the work related to this area.

<sup>2</sup> For the historically underprivileged, schooling not only provides meaningless experiences but also actively perpetuates feelings of poor self esteem and hegemonic values. This has been well documented. (See for example: Krishna Kumar’s (1989) observation of a tribal boy’s experience in a social studies class or Murali Krishna’s ‘Pedagogic Practice and the Violence Against Dalits in Schooling’ in Sleeter et al, 2012). Also, for children with disabilities, the experience has been segregation even where ‘integration’ was attempted (Saxena, 2012).

The Curriculum preparation was a consultative process.<sup>3</sup> A consensus emerged that while inclusive education must permeate across the curriculum, student teachers must also gain a conceptual understanding. Accordingly, inclusive education is introduced as a unit in the education studies course. The unit deals with the conceptual bases of inclusive education; identifying barriers to inclusion and ways and means of overcoming them; celebrating diversity as a resource; and pointers towards creating inclusive learning environments.

The team that drafted the curriculum was also involved in preparing a handbook for teacher educators and reading materials for student teachers.

The following pointers were kept in mind while preparing student teachers' reading material (Nawani, 2010; p.158):

- meeting the pedagogic needs of the curriculum
- addressing the developmental needs of student teachers
- catering to their socio-cultural contexts
- meeting the demands of the learning context

Literature on inclusive education is vast and varied. It was a challenging task to put it across in a form comprehensible to student teachers and contextualize the content to their socio-cultural background (Mythili, 2011). After many iterations in the course of external consultations and internal meetings, the draft material was readied. The broad approach to the text was to keep the style conversational, posing a variety of questions to reflect on, and illustrating issues and ideas with vignettes, newspaper articles and short biographies.

#### **Piloting the reading material with select student teachers<sup>4</sup>**

The next phase was to try-out the draft material

with twenty student teachers of three D.Ed. Colleges in Bangalore.

The nature of engagement was primarily dialogic. The reading material was augmented with other relevant articles/chapters from books and film clippings. The sessions included extensive discussions, either in small groups or as an entire class. The student teachers were also given written assignments in the form of open-ended questionnaires, responding to contextual questions and essays.

The discussions and the written assignments provided a window into their beliefs and perceptions. For instance, beliefs about labeling children as 'smart', 'dull' based on intelligence (again as perceived from marks in exams ) appeared deep rooted, where as perceptions about caste were diverse, ranging from nuanced understandings of socio historical factors to entrenched prejudices that Dalit children are less intelligent/ irregular to school etc. Also there appeared to be widespread acceptance of social hierarchy. We decided to "explore the possibilities of seeing what is obscured by the familiar, so much a part of the everyday that it escapes notice entirely", as Maxine Greene urges. These explorations were framed by the teacher capacities for social justice suggested by Grant & Agosto (2008):

1. Commitment to inquiry based critical pedagogy
2. Forming communities of practice and collaboration
3. Engaging in reflective practice
4. Developing critical social awareness

These capacities need time and sustained efforts to develop. In our engagement of 30 hours with the student teachers, we were able to provide them with a brief experience on inquiry based critical pedagogy; suggestions for engaging in reflective practice; and underlined the importance of forming

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<sup>3</sup> *The Position Paper on Inclusive Education (Banerjee et al, 2013) provided the basis for the consultations.*

<sup>4</sup> *This activity was taken up as part of a collaborative project with DSERT and financial grant from UNICEF.*

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communities of practice and developing critical social awareness.<sup>5</sup> This effort has to be extended across the teacher education programme with teacher educators giving coherent messages. Additionally, initial hand holding and mentoring support is required for fresh teacher recruits<sup>6</sup>, if the ideas and theories of social justice is to be put into practice. Also teacher educators have to be sensitised to the discomfort student teachers face when questioning knowledge about themselves, their relation to others or the world (Kumashiro, 2008). Most importantly teacher educators need to consciously develop the capacities they aspire in their student teachers.

While teachers' capacities need to be built and their vision is needed for “emancipatory teaching” (Hammerness et al, 2005), as Poonam Batra (2014)

cautions teachers should not become “objects of reform”. Teachers are part of the system and while teacher education needs to play a significant role in empowering them, policies and laws have to ensure institutional structures that do not undermine teacher autonomy. Also Amman Madan (2013) points out that the relation between schooling and school structure is complex and requires a “nuanced understanding” (p. 138). Work on social justice and teacher education in our country must foster such an understanding.

“Education is linked to freedom to the ability to see but also to alter, to understand but also to reinvent, to know and also to transform the world” (Ayers 2004,p.21). Both individuals and institutes need to develop “adaptive expertise” (Grant & Agosto 2008) if schooling has to ensure this education.

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<sup>5</sup> We found that while the reading material was adequate in developing some perspectives related to discriminations; clarifying a few concepts, such as intelligence; and appreciate the need to develop an inclusive learning environment, some of the vignettes and activities suggested seemed to reinforce their existing beliefs and prejudices. We are in the process of revisiting these sections. Also, in her review of our material, Jane Sahi has pointed out that social justice issues should not be super imposed from an external perspective. The engagement with student teachers has given us insights to communicate the issues more organically, emerging for the student teachers' concerns and beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> A study we took up as part of the UNICEF funded project, shows deeply entrenched beliefs on inclusion among teachers of both Government and Private schools. Even if we assume a robust teacher preparation programme that can develop teacher capacities for social justice, newly appointed teachers would need strong convictions and enormous confidence, to translate these into practice, in existing schools. This is where a more proactive role by teacher education institutes would be crucial in helping build communities of practice among alumni and much needed mentoring support.

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