

Inclusive Education: Concepts and Approaches

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Abstract

Inclusive growth of a country leads to development, thus benefiting every citizen. This is a vast field of action embracing all activities of the nation, of which education is one of the most important. This paper focuses on primary education as an area of attention in inclusive growth, while also taking a bird's-eye view of certain aspects of secondary and higher education. It has not attempted to go into details of inclusive education separately. The thrust approach should be to create in the child from the very early stages of primary education, a thirst for knowledge which is sustained throughout life. This is the first step towards Inclusive Education, with potential benefits that percolate to secondary and higher education. Collecting ideas of alternative and innovative practices happening elsewhere in the country can prove helpful. Some such efforts have been mentioned in the paper.

Keywords: Celebrating diversities, Inclusive curriculum, Inclusive education, Development.

'Inclusion', by definition, aims to involve and help everyone. The concept of inclusion is no different in the realm of education. 'Inclusive Education' is an attempt to make sure that different varieties of learners – those with disabilities, linguistic or cultural differences, varied familial backgrounds and interests, and even different ways of learning – are exposed to teaching strategies that reach them as individual learners. Inclusive education, therefore, considers the rights of all students, changing the school environment so that each student receives individual attention and support that can in turn lead to meaningful learning. It involves enhancing the quality of education by improving the effectiveness of teachers, promoting learner-centric methodologies, developing appropriate textbooks and learning material, and ensuring that schools are safe and healthy for all children. Strengthening links with the community is also vital; relationships between teachers, students, parents, and the society at large, are crucial for developing inclusive learning environments.

The overall goal of inclusion in education is to **ensure that the school is a place where all children can participate and are treated equally**. This involves a change in how we think about education. Many of our current education systems need to be transformed in order to deal with the diverse requirements of the complete spectrum of learners. Speaking of inclusion in Indian education, it is essential to see to the present state of education and why a change in its setup is required.

Indian Education – An Overview of Current Trends

Looking at the present state of literacy in India, one finds that even though the country's literacy rate has gone upto 74.4%, the drop in its **illiteracy rate** has not matched the increase in population. The following statistics, reported in a *Times of India* article in 2016, attest to this reality:

A 2015 UNESCO report said that in terms of absolute numbers, India with 28.7 crore illiterates – was the country with the largest number of adults without basic literacy skills in 2010- 11 compared to 2000- 01 when it has 30.4 crore illiterates.

The fact that illiteracy is not being tackled is evident from the enrolment rates in primary schools. Over 12 years (2000-01 to 2013 -14), the number of children who enrolled in primary schools increased by just 1.86 crore, and at the upper primary level by just over 2 crore. The population during this period, however, increased by more than 18 crore... That the literacy rate has been rising steadily since Independence is something to cheer about, but not when viewed in conjunction with the exponential growth in population. (Kumar, 2016)

As per Oxfam India, "India's literacy rate has increased six times since the end of the British rule – from 12% to 74% in 2011, yet India has the world's largest population of illiterates...60 lakh children in India are out of school." (Oxfam India, 2015)

The Indian state of Kerala presents a different perspective. Though there is a dip in enrolment rate across the country compared to the growth in population, we still find Kerala reflecting a 100% literacy rate. As reported by The Christian Monitor in a 2005 web article:

The roots of Kerala's literacy culture can be traced back at least to the Hindu rulers of the nineteenth century. The Queen of Trivandrum issued a royal decree in 1817 that said, "The state should defray the entire cost of education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment." She hoped education would make her people "better subjects and public servants." The Kings of Cochin also built public schools and promoted elementary education. Christian missionaries gave a further boost to education by setting up schools for the poor and oppressed, bypassing traditions that had allowed only high-caste Indians to attend school. In the early twentieth century, social reformers in the region continued the drive for education for the lower castes and for girls. All of this gave Kerala a head start and by 1961 the state had double the literacy rate of the rest of India: 55% compared with the Indian average of 28%. (Raman, 2005)

Such steps taken in Kerala facilitate and enable inclusion in education. Taking a cue from the above, we can proceed to develop approaches to ensure inclusion in education throughout the nation.

Implementation of Inclusive Education – A Suggested Approach

Central questions concerning the role of education in opening up opportunities for everyone revolve around **who has access to what** levels and types of education. They also revolve around **what is learned** and the effects of **post-school outcomes of education** on occupational attainment, income, social status, and even power. We must make education a means for reducing disparities of all kinds, particularly economic and social. Principles of access and equity should be built into the policies and procedures for admission, or we can hold out opportunities for the hitherto excluded. Primary education has already been declared a Fundamental Right and must be implemented in all earnestness. Greater emphasis should be given to non-formal education as well.

Children possess an amazing drive and capacity to learn. Contrary to popular belief, this drive and capacity does not turn itself off when children turn five or six, but instead gets discouraged by the coercive system of schooling that stifles their creativity. It is here that the educational ideas of Jiddu Krishnamurti become relevant. Krishnamurti's ideas on education and life encourage inclusion in education, and propose an alternative schooling method wherein inclusion can be effectively implemented.

The typical schooling system sides with the majority. Students are directed to fit into the pattern created by the majority. This is the polar opposite of inclusion. Every single child is good at something, and it is the duty of teachers and parents to find out what they are good at and encourage them to pursue that. The emphasis should not be on assimilating differences, but instead on celebrating differences in all children, while also providing them much needed life skills, and in the process finding out what each child really loves doing. This point towards the beginning of inclusion in schools.

Inclusion is not limited to the act of tolerating a person who is different from the group; in fact, it extends to accepting them and celebrating that acceptance by continually trying to make the inclusion stronger, more permanent, and durable. The schools of Krishnamurti, for instance, refrain from setting a norm of the 'best' student; the teachers have diverse goals for all children, including children who have special needs. This puts considerably less pressure on the students themselves as they do not have to meet a set criteria established for them by teachers. Moreover, the group teachers in classrooms that have children with special needs, work to ensure that sufficient time is invested in sensitizing the other children with respect to the needs of the special child, as opposed to trying to fit the child in the mould of the classroom. Thus, the child with 'special' needs is not taught how to conform to the existing classroom structure. Instead, the elements of the entire classroom open up and create a space to allow him to settle in and provide him with his own definition of comfort and acceptance.

Diversity is also visible through the morning rituals where songs that are sung have linguistic (Kannada, Bengali, Hindi, Marathi) as well as religious variety. Moreover, the teachers themselves are from diverse backgrounds, most of who have joined as a result of their passion for learning. The campus of a Krishnamurti school may thus have a mix of teachers – cancer surgeons, accountants, civil engineers, social workers, Montessori-trained teachers, as well as psychology majors.

The learning environments in Krishnamurti schools have always welcomed children from varying socio-economic backgrounds, even before the same was formalized by the Right to Education (RTE) Act. The schools have nonetheless fully accepted the outcomes of the RTE Act. Children whose parents cannot afford the school fees receive funds and special provisions via informal scholarship-like arrangements that the school management creates, and that parents of other children can also participate in (Pandey, 2014-2015, p.11).

Collecting ideas of alternative and innovative practices happening elsewhere in the country can prove helpful. For quality schooling to come into being, nature, a sense of space and silence are crucial factors. Education should lead to integrated development of human beings, letting each individual flower to their fullest capacity in an atmosphere of freedom and togetherness. It should give importance to observation without preconceptions, encourage dialogues, inculcate a sense of responsibility, and emphasize the inner human nature which in turn governs outer actions. All of these are characteristics of a **holistic education**. This type of education is being carried out with some modifications in alternative schools such as the Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) schools. Interactions with these schools can assist other schools around the country in becoming more inclusive.

We have to create in the younger generation a desire to work together with tolerance and empathy, and to learn to live with differences. The purpose of education is to replace an empty mind with an open one. As such, children must be exposed to different ideas, viewpoints, cultures, languages and traditions. This will enable them to **celebrate differences by breaking down barriers**, or open the doors of – or seek out – diversities. There is also a need to bring the concept of good citizenship and values into the curriculum through appropriate role models, anecdotes, stories, visits, dialogues and discussions of happenings in and around society. Current concerns such as democracy, citizenship, participation, and heritage, appreciation of arts and humanities, and exposure to science for everyday living –so as to encourage students to become more balanced – must be appropriately woven into the education of every individual. For this we must use non-formal education as much as possible, including countrywide classrooms to enable ‘education without walls’ or ‘education for all’.

Students with advantages should be exposed to the travails and lifestyles of the disadvantaged, as well as to the ways in which they approach problems of all kinds – physical, financial and emotional. While teaching them to empathise with the less fortunate, and creating opportunities for the less privileged to come up in education and in life, we have to seek every opportunity to promote factors which bring people together or unite them by way of integration, such as the unifying spirit of being Indian and having shared values.

Every individual must be taught to respect and do his duty to others, especially those who are less fortunate. This could be done via programmes for the community through campus outreach activities. A community or municipal school can be adopted by the educational institution and a programme can be designed for them according to their needs (including upgrading the skills and attitude of teachers) so that

the quality of life, and learning therein, improves. We should also bring essential knowledge to the notice of common people.

The gender dimension has to be woven into every department's work and curriculum, and the concept of human rights brought in wherever possible. Mentoring of students (who are backward) by seniors, can help empower them to perform better as citizens. An inclusive curriculum addresses the child's cognitive, emotional and creative development. It is based on the four pillars of education for the 21st century – learning to know, to do, to be and to live together. Children who learn together learn to live together. This starts in the classroom. The curriculum has an instrumental role to play in fostering tolerance and promoting human rights, and is a powerful tool for transcending cultural, religious and other differences. An inclusive curriculum takes gender, cultural identity and language background into consideration. It involves breaking gender stereotypes not only in textbooks but in teachers' attitudes and expectations. Multilingual approaches in education, in which language is recognized as an integral part of a student's cultural identity, can act as a source of inclusion.

A **learning society** does not confine education within the four walls of the school or the college. It embraces all human activities at all times and in all places. It is a **sharing society** where there is neither the privileged nor the oppressed, where education is a continuum – unbroken.

Mention has to be made at this stage about a scheme that is being drawn up for providing life-long learning opportunities to all people beyond basic literacy and primary education. Some of the programmes in this sector are income generating programmes meant to improve the quality of life, particularly in rural India where the heart of the country still beats. Extension Education is the process of teaching rural people how to live better by learning ways to improve their farm, home and community institutions. It can take the shape of Agricultural Extension, Veterinary/Animal Husbandry Extension, Dairy Extension, etc., all falling within the purview of higher agricultural education with emphasis on respective technical areas.

Universal female literacy is the core of a learning society. In developed and developing countries alike, however, higher educational attainment for women does not translate into thorough equality in occupational status and income. Education nevertheless leads to healthier, more productive populations, which is why many international organizations argue that the best long term strategy in the fight against AIDS is universal primary education.

Developments in communications and instructional technologies also provide unimaginable opportunities for people of all ages to tap into the vast stores of global knowledge. This improves self-directed learning with modern aids, which however, can never replace an efficient and understanding teacher.

A special mention is made of the physically and mentally challenged. There is a need to make such people self-dependent so that they may not be a burden on society – to adjust themselves in school, family and other social attainments, so that they may be able to solve their day-to-day problems. This calls for trained

teachers with specialized skills. The concept of Inclusive Education argues that all children, irrespective of the nature and degree of their disability, should be educated in general schools with normal children.

Inclusive Education is all about making classrooms responsive to the needs of the learner. It stresses on child-centred pedagogy using peer-tutoring, co-operative learning and group learning. The thrust approach should be to create in the child from the very early stages of primary education, a thirst for knowledge which is sustained throughout life. This is the first step towards Inclusive Education, and if successfully taken, will lead to benefits that percolate beyond primary education and into secondary and higher education.

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