



Challenges of Inclusive Education: Policies and Practices

Lieutenant Dr. Shahjahan Ali

Associate Prof. , PG Department of Education, B.H. College, Howly.781316

Mob:7002839373, Email : shahjahanali1972@gmail.com

Abstract

Many national as well as international programmes have attempted to reach out the marginalized children but those with disabilities are often forgotten and remain invisible. In the 1990s, international aid agencies recommended that poverty reduction programmes specifically target people with disabilities in addition to other disadvantaged groups, such as women, scheduled castes or dalits and tribal communities (World Bank, 2004). The MDGs approved by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, recommended that poverty reduction efforts has to include individuals with disabilities along with already targeted groups. These MDGs have been provided the framework for government intervention in India, contributing to legislation and programmes for inclusive education as a cost-effective and quality option for all excluded children. Despite these efforts for inclusive education in India, about 94% of children with disabilities didn't receive any educational services. It is due the shortcomings of the earlier legislations. As a response to these limitations of earlier efforts for promoting inclusive education, the government of India introduced new policies on the education of children with disabilities. In this paper identifies the limitations of these earlier efforts in the context of survey findings and examines the responsiveness of the recent policies for inclusion to these limitations of earlier efforts. The challenges of Inclusive Education, Policies, practices and the service provisions in India is discussed in the paper.

Key Word: Inclusive Education, Challenges, Policies and Practices

Introduction

One of the greatest problems the world is facing today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from the meaningful partnership in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities. Such a society is neither efficient nor safe.

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in Thailand in 1990 set the goal of Education for All. UNESCO, along with other UN agencies, and a number of international and national non-governmental organizations, has been working towards achieving this goal-adding to the efforts made at the country level.

Despite encouraging developments, there are still an estimated 113 million children in the world not enrolled in primary school (DFID, 2001). In case of India, there are an estimated 25 million children out of school (MHRD 2003 Statistics, cited in World Bank, 2004), many of whom are marginalized by the dimensions such as , poverty, gender, disability and caste.

In the 1990s, international aid agencies recommended that poverty reduction programmes specifically target people with disabilities in addition to other disadvantaged groups, such as women, scheduled castes or Dalits and tribal communities (World Bank, 2004). The Dakar World Education Forum, 2000 confirmed that education can play a key role in overcoming exclusion of the disabled. Inclusive Education was identified as a key strategy for the development of EFA. The MDGs approved by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium

Summit in 2000, also recommended that poverty reduction efforts has to include individuals with disabilities along with already targeted groups. These MDGs have been provided the framework for government intervention in India, contributing to legislation and programmes for inclusive education as a cost-effective and quality option for all children-children with disability included.

Despite these efforts for inclusive education in India, about 94% of children with disabilities didn't receive any educational services and some specific groups like children/youth with mental retardation; disabled children in rural areas, and girls/women with disabilities were further marginalized and remain unidentified. In addition to NSS Survey, many studies indicated fragmented implementation of inclusive education (*Alur, 2002; Jangira, 2002*), exclusion of people who don't fit the required criteria (*Singal, 2005*), inadequate resources and dissemination (*Jha, 2001*), miniscule coverage of children with disabilities in the mainstream institutions (*Julka, 2005*). All these studies indicate towards the lack of quality programming for inclusive education.

Further as a response to these limitations of earlier efforts for promoting inclusive education, the government of India introduced two new policies on the education of children with disabilities- The Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005, and The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006.

Disability and the Millennium Development Goals

In the late 1990s, international aid agencies identified people with disabilities as another vulnerable group, noting that disability is both a cause and a result of poverty (World Bank, 2004). It was thought that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for education (MDG 2- universal primary education in all the countries by 2015) cannot be achieved without Disability Focus (DFID, 2002). Thus, disability became a centre stage priority for Indian Government to reduce poverty and various legislations were enacted in the nineties for providing education to children with special needs.

Legislations for Inclusion of Persons with Disability

In the 1990s, the government enacted three disability related legislations- The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) Act, 1992; The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995; and The National Trust (for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities) Act, 1999.

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) Act 1992 passed in the Parliament, was created by the then Ministry of Welfare (presently known as the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) to regulate the manpower development programmes in the field of education of children with special needs.

The Persons With Disabilities (PWD) Act, 1995 mandates that state or local governments (1) undertake yearly screenings to identify 'at risks' cases, and public awareness media campaigns on causes and prevention, (2) ensure every disabled child's access to a free education in an appropriate environment, promoting integration in normal schools, (3) authorize a 3% reservation quota in employment, (4) provide accessibility to buildings, transport and other public services, and (5) appoint a Disability Commissioner to monitor funds and safeguards the rights of people with disabilities.

The National Trust Act, 1999, provides for the constitution of a central body, the National Trust, to safeguard the rights and interests of people with disabilities. The Trust's primary objectives are to enable people with disability to live as independently as possible within and as close to the community to which they belong, by (1) extending support and need based services for families during periods of crisis, (2) developing procedures for appointing a guardian or trustee in the event of a parent's death, and (3) establishing self-help groups towards realizing their rights. Facilities may include respite care, foster family care or day care, residential hotels and homes

Limitations of the earlier legislations

Poor conceptualization and execution have impeded the impact of these legislations on inclusive education service provision. Studies on policy makers' and school professionals' perspective on inclusive education in India, found that inclusion is interpreted differently from the west (Singal, 2005). Singal noted that 'integration' and 'inclusion' were used interchangeably as if they meant the same, and that inclusion referred to an education not merely for the children with disabilities but for all the marginalized groups. Kalyanpur (2006), found that inclusive education is considered as any educational service, even a special school, for children with disabilities because it will result in their inclusion in society.

Another limitation of the earlier efforts is the *weightage given to the medical model and charity of disability than the social or human rights model of disability*. Social model, i.e. the human rights perspective on which the Acts are based, is not reflected in the larger societal milieu. Studies show that the general public considers it as an 'obligation' or 'sympathy' to meet the needs of the persons with disability and the professionals working in the field consider it as a 'compromise'.

Prevalence of Disability in India

In India, estimates of disabled population come from two different sources, both adopting the household survey approach. These are- the Population census conducted once in every ten years and the Sample surveys of the disabled conducted again more or less once in ten years, by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in the Ministry of Statistics and Programme implementation.

According to the 2001 Census, there were a total of 21.91 million disabled persons out of a total population of 1028 million. The prevalence rate was thus 2.13 percent of the total population. *The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO)* conducts sample surveys on various socio-economic subjects on a regular basis through their annual Rounds. The first comprehensive survey on the subject was conducted in their 36th Round (July-December 1981), then again in its 47th Round (July-December 1991) and most recently in its 58th Round (July-December 2002). The first two surveys (1981 and 1991) covered only physical disabilities, while the latest survey (2002) covered mental disabilities as well.

In 2002 survey it was found that about 8.4% of the households in the rural areas and 6.1% of those in the urban areas reported to have at least one disabled person. The number of disabled persons was estimated at 18.49 million during July-December 2002. This formed 1.8% of the total population. There were 14.09 million disabled persons in rural areas and 4.40 million in the urban areas. There were 10.89 million men and 7.60 million women among the disabled.

The prevalence rates of disability, according to NSS survey were 1.8% for any type of disability, 2.0% among males and 1.5% among females. As in the Census, it was found that the prevalence rates were lower for females than the males and in the urban areas in comparison to rural areas.

Limited Educational Service Provisions

The NSS survey 2002 shows that the total number of people with disabilities in the country is 18.49 million, constituting about 1.8% of the total population. In terms of educational levels, only 11% of the children with disabilities between the ages of 5-18 years in urban areas and less than 1% in rural areas, were enrolled in special schools, and only 7% in rural and 18% in urban areas having completed secondary education. Girls with disabilities had lower enrolment ratios than boys with disabilities. Of all the disability categories, persons with mental retardation were least likely to receive an education, had the lowest enrolment ratio in school.

Label-Based Segregation Practices in the Identification Process: Are persons with disabilities in the count?

According to the NSS 2002 survey, the rate of incidence of any disability was 69 per 100,000 populations. It is 69 persons in rural areas and 67 persons in urban areas. The small degree of difference between rural and urban areas is disproportionate to the distribution of general population. As, about 74% lives in rural areas, it indicates that a large number of rural people with disabilities are not included in the count. This limitation can be due to the lack of responses from the people as well as the ineffectiveness of the tools for data collection.

Same is the case with the persons with mental retardation. Individuals with locomotor disabilities make up the largest group by disability category across rural and urban areas averaging about 53%, while individuals with mental retardation constitute the smallest category at 4%. It is because physical impairments are largely visible and thus identified in large numbers, whereas less visible conditions like mental illness, learning disabilities etc tend to get overlooked.

This negative attitude which is a result of medical model also contributes to the exclusion of the girls with disability from the count. For instance, the perception of women as a burden in a patriarchal society exacerbates the situation of women with disability as they get double discriminated. The families of such girls with disability often prefer to hide the disability of their daughters out of shame. A large number of such girls remain invisible because of the social stigma attached to them.

Government's Recent Inclusive Education Policies

As a response to the limitations of the earlier efforts, the Government of India has introduced two new policies on the education of people with disabilities. To what extent these recent policies respond to the shortcomings of the earlier efforts and the lacunae identified in the Census? This section attempts to answer this question.

Policies

The directives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have resulted in two government policies on disability- *The Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) in 2005* under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and *The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2006* under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE).

The Action plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005

Unlike the earlier scheme of IEDC that stressed to place the children with disabilities in the regular schools without making any changes in the school to accommodate, the revised IECYD, in contrast, stresses to modify the existing physical infrastructure and teaching methodologies to meet the needs of all children, including children with special needs (*MHRD, 2005*). In this way it clears the confusion with the concept of inclusive education. It also promises to provide in-service and pre-service training to regular education teachers on disability and inclusive education through collaboration with the Rehabilitation Council and the National Council for Teachers' Education as well as to pre-school (Aganwadis) workers in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme.

The Action Plan (under the Ministry of Human Resource Development) preceded the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2006 and it provided many implementation strategies that are implicit in the policy. Both the ministries have same objectives, where one has framed it in its action plan and other in its vision.

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities announced by the Government of India in 2006 reflects the new emphasis of bringing persons with disabilities into the mainstream of society. The policy seems to adopt the social model of disability. It recognizes that “persons with disabilities are valuable human resource for the country”. It seeks to create an environment that provides those equal opportunities, protection of their rights and full participation in society.

NEP 2020

NEP 2020 strongly promotes inclusive education by advocating for quality learning opportunities for all, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, disability, or other factors, and aims to bridge existing gaps in access and participation. The policy emphasizes inclusivity for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including children with disabilities, and seeks to transform the education system through enhanced teacher training, technology integration, and accessible infrastructure, although challenges in implementation remain.

These policies show that although the government has responded to the earlier shortcomings especially in the sense of considering the human rights issue of the persons with disability, it is still not satisfactory as many of the promises are only in policy documents but the real implementation is poor.

Reality of Mainstreaming

The National Policy mandates to include the persons with disabilities in the general education system but has not defined what is meant by this general education system. Is it mainstreaming in regular schools or the same type of education that can be given in special schools also. Despite the promotion of inclusive education, the government documents focus on inclusive education as being about including the children with disabilities in the education system, but not specifically the mainstream (*Singal, 2005*). However, inclusion in the education system is not same as inclusion in mainstream or regular schools.

Policies to be Applied

The Inclusive Education Policies in India need to be reformed in several ways. Policy makers need to consider these issues and constraints in interpretation and implementation of inclusive education in order to bring a revised policy that can enforce the better implementation of inclusive education.

✓ Label free Policy and Survey

The children identified in the policies or surveys are identified as ‘disabled’ or ‘SEN learners’. These labels in the policy show that policy itself is reinforcing segregation by means of language that is declaring the children with disabilities as ‘disabled’ and is categorizing learners based on individual characteristics. Policies that don’t require labeling of students in order to identify need for services should be considered preferable. Identification and placement of students should be based on needs for services and not on the category of Special Education Needs.

✓ Access and Participation

Access should not be limited to only physical access (building) but also with the academic/program access (to curriculum and instruction through adaptations and support), social access (to peers), and economic access (to affordable schooling).

✓ **Developing inclusive curricula, teaching and learning methods**

- Promotion of active, participatory and child centered learning and teaching methods to allow children to work at an appropriate pace, in groups or individually, and partnering children with and without disabilities as peer educators to enable mutual learning
- Adopting a curriculum to enable all children to acquire the core academic curriculum and basic cognitive skills, together with essential life skills, including respect for human rights.
- Creative use of assistive technology to make it easier for students with disabilities to learn, including physical resources, computers and use of ICTs.

✓ **A child centered, safe and healthy environment**

- Establishing close links between health and education services to provide a connection between school, community and the family, revolving around the child's well-being.
- Promoting effective community partnerships to ensure positive interaction between the school and the community
- Developing health and safety standards for the building of schools to reflect the needs of children in inclusive settings
- Providing safe and stimulating opportunities for play and recreation for all children
- Ensuring that, in the case of natural and man-made disasters, all children are easily able to evacuate any buildings and routines are in place on how to respond in such situations.

✓ **Assessment and Evaluation**

Assessment of the students is one of the most significant challenges for IE. In India, there is a lack of expertise in conducting assessments. There is a heavy reliance on standardized test scores as outcome measures of success at the school level. There is a strong need to develop policies that allocate resources (economic and technical) to schools for training in evaluation and assessment that measures academic as well as social outcomes.

✓ **Attitudinal Changes**

Attitude constitutes a big challenge before Inclusive Education in India. The societal attitudes or cultural constructs cannot be ignored when looking at the policy implications because attitudes are largely responsible for the poor and improper implementation of IE policy. Negative attitude towards the children with disabilities especially towards the children with mental retardation is one of the main causes of unsuccessful implementation. There is need for bringing attitudinal changes among all stakeholders ranging from government officials to teachers as well as parents and the other community members.

✓ **Pre-service Training and In-service Professional Development**

Though, the Action plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities 2005 stresses on the pre-service and in-service training of the general as well as special teachers, there is still a big gap between the pre-service training and in-service professional development that acts as a barrier to teach a diverse range of learners. Policies that would encourage building bridges between pre-service and in-service training through school-university collaboration is required for trained teachers to promote Inclusive Education.

Conclusion

India, being the largest democracy in the world, needs to be highly focused with the issues and constraints of Inclusive Education so that all the marginalized children may be able to fulfill their rights as citizens. There is also a need of proper accountability mechanisms to check the policy implementation. There

should be a strong commitment by the government as well as all stakeholders to provide support to Inclusive Education. Lessons must be learnt from the shortcomings of the earlier efforts for inclusive education and the necessary steps must be taken to embrace inclusive education that can result in the poverty reduction in the country.

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