



## **Inclusive Education and Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract:**

Children in special schools were seen as geographically and socially segregated from their peers, and the initial movement to locationally integrate these students in mainstream schools ('integration') shifted to one where the whole school was encouraged to become more adaptable and inclusive in its day-to-day educational practices for all students ('inclusive education'). Pedagogy in particular was highlighted as the key to meeting all students' educational needs by making the curriculum flexible, and so more accessible. Teaching methods which can make curriculum accessible to children with disabilities can also make learning accessible to all students (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow, 1991), a teacher or school principal is well on the way to improving the overall quality of their school.

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When considering understandings of, approaches to, and impacts of inclusive education, the inevitable diversity and complexity in a context of this size must be taken into account. This diversity is further reflected in disparities of educational achievement. For example, in Kerala the literacy rate recorded in the 2001 Census was 90.92%, while in Bihar it was 47.53% (GOI, 2002).

Several education acts and promises have been passed or mooted by central government in India in the past twenty years, although they do not seem to tackle the roots of attitudinal barriers to

inclusion. For example, in 1993 the Delhi Declaration on Education for All promised to “...ensure a place for every child in a school or appropriate education programme according to his or her capabilities” (cited in Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2002: 96). This issue of ‘capabilities’ is key to the varied interpretations of ‘inclusivity’ of children, the focus on the child’s abilities diverting attention away from inadequate teaching methods (Singal, 2005b). This is perhaps true for some teachers, but the continued development of government and NGO teacher training programmes would also appear to show awareness of the need for pedagogical change. As “disabling educational environments affect all children, not only those who are identified as having impairments,” (Miles, 2000: 11) it is essential that school quality issues are identified and addressed. The re-conceptualisation of inclusive education as a school quality issue could have significant impact on educational change in India for all children. Indeed, one of Singal’s (2005a: 10) government official interviewees pointed out, “what has been asked for till now is only a physical space. This has not resulted in any changes, and it is not asking for changes that will be beneficial.” This suggests that with the reconceptualisation of inclusive education, from students with special needs to all children, school quality could improve nationwide.

Teacher education is certainly key to this metamorphosis, but without a wider understanding of the meaning of IE for all learners (Panda, 2005), it will make little difference. This has been proved to date with the huge investment into government teacher training programmes that have yielded little long-term fruit in the shape of pedagogical revolution. The non-implementation of child-centered teaching methods may be influenced by a focus on theory rather than practice (Holdsworth, 1994), the brevity of teacher training courses without follow-up or feedback (Dyer, 2000), or simply a lack of basic teacher knowledge leading to insecurity that they will not be able to answer a question (Dyer, 2000). Nevertheless, this failure to change pedagogy is not only due to teacher education course design, but also the reality of 24.5% teacher absenteeism (World Bank, 2004), combined with resource-constrained institutions with large classes and an inflexible curriculum which force the teachers to return to didactic habits in order to cope. Croft (2006) however, suggests that class size need not be a hindrance in the practice of child-centered pedagogy if training takes into account the context-specific knowledge and methods teachers already use in their large, diverse classes, and progresses from this point.

A further hindrance to new pedagogy is that parental expectations are of exam results, not of 'joyful learning'. Hence, the pressure on teachers is even greater to avoid change. This exam 'backwash' no doubt contributes to the notion of within-child deficit and faith in IQ (which has been discredited due to its over-reliance on access to conventional education in order to score highly (Thorpe & McKie, 2002)) which can only be altered by attitudinal change aided by teacher education. For example, exam success from the practice of innovative teaching methodology, as demonstrated in the SIDH programme, can change attitudes towards child-centered pedagogy (Crumpton, 1999).

It is not only teachers who benefit from training, but local government administrators too, as their support and understanding of inclusive education could provide invaluable assistance to institutional innovation (Holdsworth, 1994). This reflects Miles' (2000) belief that good working relationships are critical to the implementation of inclusive education. SCUK (Miles, 2002) recommends a whole school approach to the inclusion of children with disabilities, in that all teachers are consulted and trained, not a select few 'specialists'.

Many of the issues and constraints surrounding the interpretation and implementation of inclusive education encountered in the Indian context, are not unique to India. However, the all-pervasive caste system, as a barrier to attitudinal change, is. The context-specificity of this socio-religious construct is a factor that cannot be ignored when looking at the implications for the future of any aspect of life in India. However, the caste system will not disappear overnight, but it is a highly constructed world within which all implications must be considered and all potential change would take place. In a more positive light, it may be that by being a fifth caste, or even outside the system, works to the advantage of people with disabilities in that their development could be perceived as being unrelated to caste, and so more amenable to innovative thinking.

Many academics in the field of inclusive education point to teacher education and school leadership as essential for the implementation of inclusive education in the classroom (Ainscow, 2005; Sandhill & Singh, 2005; Booth et al, 2003; Ainscow, 1991), yet the standard of teacher training courses across India varies hugely, and they usually approach the inclusion of children

with disabilities from a deficit perspective. In the general teacher education diplomas and degrees available nationwide, there is an optional 'special needs' paper to train and 'prepare' teachers to identify and diagnose disability. However, it is not an integral part of the training, and it does not train teachers to deal with diversity or challenge negative attitudes (Singal, 2005a). This reinforces the 'difference' of children with disabilities who, some believe, can only be taught by teachers qualified specifically for them (Singal, 2005a). However, it is ultimately teacher treatment of students in the classroom, rather than the training per se, that would reinforce this difference.

Interestingly, distrust in both the special and mainstream education systems leads some parents to keep their children with disabilities at home for fear of their abuse or neglect in the classroom (Julka, 2005), which may then be interpreted by teachers as a lack of community interest in education for their children. This raises the question of how teachers are being trained to include children with disabilities and to what extent they put this training into daily practice. Without access to qualitative research data specifically observing these teacher education outcomes, it is impossible to know. While it may be true that a lack of teacher training to deal with diversity or challenge negative attitudes results in a specialist, medical deficit, focus, there is certainly a need to train teachers in specific disabilities (which the Rehabilitation Council of India does) for students who could benefit from special lessons in skills such as Braille, sign-language or speech therapy.

There is evidence to suggest that many teachers do not feel equipped to teach children with disabilities and complain that they need more time to instruct these students (Mukhopadhyay, nd). Many government programmes have included a teacher training component in an attempt to instigate institutional change. However, a 'special needs' focus and a lack of training for management, combined with didactic training methodology do little to alter the classroom status quo, especially when responsibility is shifted onto a specialist resource teacher rather than methods altered to suit all students (Mukhopadhyay, nd). When teacher training is taken out of the context of programme islands and geographically accessible environments, teachers are found to be reluctant to attend training because it takes place in their free time and holidays . Teacher posts remain unfilled, even in Delhi, because of a lack of qualified personnel, which can

also lead to state employment of under-qualified teachers, further impacting on school quality . However, a teacher can be fully qualified, but if the training is sub-standard it will still have a negative impact on teaching and learning quality in the classroom, whereas an under-qualified, poorly paid teacher with some imagination and innovative practices may have a positive effect. The poor quality educational provision in many schools is reflected in the fact that many government job reservations for adults with disabilities remain unfilled. Some may interpret this as due to the lack of ability many in Indian society believe is inherent in the disabled community. It is more likely to be directly related to the fact that so few children with disabilities get to, or stay in, school, that there is a lack of qualified, let alone confident, candidates. However, although school (and pedagogical) quality would appear to be one of the keys to an end to marginalisation for children with disabilities, the current locational inclusion focus of inclusive education in India is a major obstacle to the unlocking of this doorway to freedom and empowerment. The teacher education focus of some government programmes is perhaps going in the right direction. However, the apparently slight regard for content and methodology of the courses, which do not reconceptualise IE or address attitudes towards disability, demonstrates the need for further change in this context. Also, teachers are not the only stakeholders involved. Students, parents, administrators and local government officials are affected too, all of whom will see any innovation or new concept in a different light. However, the reconceptualisation of IE as whole school issue appears to be essential if IE is to be more than physical relocation of children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom.

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