



## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA: INTERPRETATION, IMPLEMENTATION, AND ISSUES**

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### **Introduction**

In a world where around 113 million children are not enrolled in primary school (DFID, 2001), Lewin (2000) highlights the prospective for education to reverse the negative effects of social exclusion. There are an estimated 25 million children out of school in India (MHRD 2003 statistics, cited in World Bank, 2004), many of whom are marginalized by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. While several educational programmes have attempted to reach out to these earlier excluded children. This paper aims to present a case study of the current status of inclusive education in India with a center of attention on children with disabilities. It may prove useful for anyone wishing to undertake empirical research in this, until recently, abandoned field, or basically needing to gain an overview of the educational condition in India today for children with disabilities.. After exploring some general, abstract questions concerning the significance of disability and inclusive education in the context of EFA, the paper analyses the interpretation and performance of inclusive education in India, along with the issues and constraints faced by the stakeholders involved. This is followed by discussion of the implications these may have for the future of educational inclusion of all children, particularly those with disabilities, in the areas of government policy, school quality, attitudinal change and the potential for research. Due to word-length and data limitations, the paper was not able to explore in-depth some of the more pragmatic areas of inclusive education implementation, such as curriculum access, evaluation methods, measuring achievement, and the learning environment. The paper concludes that a twin-track approach to disability may support not only in improving educational access for marginalised children, but also the reconceptualisation of inclusive education as a school

quality issue to benefit all children. This could contribute in the long-term towards the achievement of Education For All and fulfillment of the Fundamental Right to Education enshrined in the Constitution of India in 2002.

What is inclusive education?

Until Lately, most conceptual literature on inclusive education was Northern in origin, taking a ‘whole-school’ approach to institutional change (Peters, 2004), and prejudiced by the social model of disability. Children in special schools were seen as geographically and socially segregated from their peers, and the preliminary movement to locationally integrate these students in mainstream schools (‘integration’) shifted to one where the whole school was encouraged to become more adjustable 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. By recognising that teaching methods which can make curriculum accessible to children with disabilities can also make learning accessible to all students , a teacher or school principal is well on the way to improving the overall quality of their school. In this way, inclusive education is not a disability-only issue, but an educational quality issue , literature in the south, which focuses more on external factors with its ‘community approach’ (Peters, 2004). In developing contexts with large numbers of out-of-school children, inclusive education tends to be more broadly concerned with school access and education deprivations for marginalised groups such as girls, ethnic minorities, poor families and disabled children in CREATE zones one and two, who have never attended or dropped out of school (Subrahmanian, 2003). It seems that there is currently an increasing discourse on inclusive education developing amongst some academics and teaching professionals in India, inclusive education as absolutely concerned with children with Inclusive Education in India: Interpretation, Implementation and Issues 5 disabilities (Singal, 2005). This discourse is attempting to shift perceptions of disability from the medical model to the social model. However, there are many conceptual difficulties with the terms of integration and inclusion in India, which are often used interchangeably . Further, varying definitions of disability and subjective interpretations of what ‘type’ of child a teacher is willing to include in their classroom add to the confusion. Even if a previously excluded child is given access to a mainstream classroom, what happens within that space can be anything but inclusive if the school quality is poor, they cannot access nonflexible curriculum, or they are ignored or bullied by the teacher or their peers. These children would be found in CREATE zone three. Getting all children to school is thus mistaken for their right to education.” It is worth noting

that the concept of inclusive education in the majority as opposed to specialist segregated provision is a matter of heated, inconclusive debate in the north, and yet it is seemingly being transferred unquestioningly as the panacea to the exclusion of children with disabilities in the south. In northern contexts, the discourse around inclusive education is primarily concerned with segregation as opposed to inclusion in the mainstream, in the south the coverage of special schools is so limited that the discourse is concerned with inclusion being potentially the most cost and time-efficient way of improving access to educational institutions. It may be that the promotion by the World Bank and OECD of the cost-effectiveness of inclusion in the mainstream enabling both economic and social benefits may bear more relevance for resource-constrained governments and policy-makers than a child-rights approach. Although inclusive education clearly has the potential to improve teaching and learning processes for all children as well as satisfying their rights, for the purposes of this paper we will be looking at inclusive education mostly in term.

### **Implementation, Issues and Constraints**

This segment will discover the implementation of government, NGO, and private school IE programmes before examining educational policy and its accompanying issues and constraints for children with disabilities in India. IE Programmes Government Programmes Over the years, although government programmes such as Operation Blackboard and LokJumbish focused mainly on infrastructure, girls, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children, others had, or have, inclusive education components which ensure the visibility of children with disabilities. Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) The Ministry of Welfare, now Social Justice and Empowerment, implemented the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme from 1974 to 1982, when it transferred to the Department of Education (Dasgupta, 2002). The scheme was apparently intended to encourage co-operation between mainstream and special schools in order to support integration, although Julka (2005) believes this co-operation did not happen. IEDC has been replaced by the Integrated Education for the Disabled (IED) component of the national District Primary Education Project (DPEP), and supports community mobilization and early detection, in-service teacher training, architectural design in schools (Mukhopadhyay, nd), the establishment of resource centres, teacher training, identification and evaluation of children with disabilities, and the supply of specialist aids and appliances. Project on Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED) In 1987, UNICEF and the government-funded National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) launched the Project on Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED) in 10 blocks the administrative level between district and

village that focused on teacher training in order to support integration. While enrolment of children with disabilities in the mainstream increased and retention was high (Julka, 2005; Jangira&Ahuja, 1994), coverage has been “miniscule” with only 2-3% of children with disabilities integrated in mainstream institutions . Criticisms made in the project evaluation pointed to implementation issues, such as children getting financial support who were not classified as disabled, or teacher training courses being un-regulated (Julka, 2005). However, the design of the project which pessimistic continued labelling of children and withdrawal of those with disabilities from particular activities in school was not highlighted .Further, despite aiming to deliver learner-centered teacher Inclusive Education in India: Interpretation, Implementation and Issues 13 training courses, much of the course instruction was found to be traditionally formal (Jangira&Ahuja, 1994) hence failing in one of its key objectives of instigating change in pedagogy through teacher training. District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) The 1995 District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), funded 85% by Central government via a World Bank loan and support from the European Community, UNICEF and the UK and Netherlands governments, and 15% by the State governments, focused on the universalisation of primary education, particularly for girls. The intention was for district-specific planning to make the programme contextual, and for participatory processes to empower and build capacity at all levels .Extensive construction led to the creation of 200,000 new schools, and a teacher-training component led to the in-service training of all teachers. Alur (2002) argues that there were failures not so willingly reported such as corruption in the form of budgets for non-existent non-formal education centres, tribal dropout, the difficulty of multigrade teaching in one-teacher schools, low learning achievement, and no integration for children with disabilities due to continued reliance on special school systems. However, it is arguable that the existence of special school systems does not necessarily obstruct locational integration in the mainstream. Due to a lack of data, it is not feasible to confirm how many children with disabilities were, or were not, integrated under the auspices of DPEP. Janshala This community schools programme, started in 1998 and now replaced by SSA , was a collaboration between the Government of India and the UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, the ILO, and UNFPA, and supported the government drive towards universal primary education. It covered 120, mainly rural, blocks in 9 States where there is evidence of low female literacy, child labour, and SC/ST children not catered for under DPEP (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Unfortunately, due to limited availability of data, it is not possible to elaborate on any issues arising on the Janshalaprogramme, which has a component designed to improve the attendance of difficult to reach groups of children,

including children with disabilities. SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA) SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA) is the government's millennial Education For All umbrella programme for all education schemes, which aims to universalise elementary education. The goals are that all children aged 6-14 i) will be in some form of education by 2003, ii) will complete 5 years' primary education by 2007) will complete 8 years' education by 2010. Disability indicators are included in the government agreement for SSA , although what exactly these are and whether they are taken on at local level is unclear. In fact, although one of the official SSA objectives is the enrolment of children with disabilities, the World Bank (2004) SSA project appraisal does not list disability as a key indicator, unlike gender, SC and ST. The fact that there are still many children out-of-school in 2006 demonstrates not only how behind this programme already is, but also how over-ambitious the infrastructure-led SSA Inclusive Education in India: Interpretation, Implementation and Issues 14 goals were in the first place. For example, of the 1 million new classrooms that should have been built by 2007, there are only 300,000; 100,000 of which are not fully functional . Part of the "compelling" rationale for World Bank assistance to SSA was the continuous monitoring and evaluation and the "built-in accountability mechanism at the school and community levels". However, despite an awareness of SSA lagging so far behind in the achievement of its intended targets, there is apparently no sign of accelerated political momentum to lend a sense of urgency to the task . This is perhaps a reflection of there being " no condition of effectiveness" in the World Bank interest-free loan contributing towards the funding of SSA (World Bank) there is a high risk of some states not being able to afford to finance the programme (Govinda and Biswal, 2006; Lal, 2005), and perhaps an supplementary weakening of political will and programme implementation. The lack of political voice of the poorest people this programme is deliberate to assist, further pushes education to the lower strata of politicians' agendas. While criticism from the Indian media may be justified and necessary to raise awareness, it remains to be seen whether SSA will be able to adapt and become more effective over the next four years.

### **Implications**

While there is no shortage of issues and constraints in the interpretation and implementation of inclusive education in India, it is important to remember that it is at a very early stage of conceptualization and implementation. The fact that it is being discussed and in some places implemented, albeit falteringly, demonstrates a willingness to engage with elements of a new concept that has the potential to be developed in the future in a positive manner. This section will explore the implications that these issues have for possible areas of development that

could move forward mutual understandings of how inclusive education could benefit the Indian education system, or rather the people in it.

### **Conclusion**

In his influential work on educational change, Fullan (1993) highlights the complexity of the change process from a phenomenological perspective - stakeholder-driven and influenced, not straightforward, and a long-term journey or process of conflict, rather than a blueprint. In this long-term, light, the sporadic implementation of inclusive education may be one step on this lengthy journey during which stakeholders learn from mistakes and adapt their plans and practices accordingly. 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. This may partly enlighten why inclusive education is perceived by various as an inevitability rather than a policy preference, because resources cannot stretch to the number of special schools and specialist teachers that would be needed to cater for this excluded group. However, although children with disabilities are unlikely to suffer from only one exclusionary dimension, they are often excluded from programmes for girls, or SC, ST or OBC students, further reinforcing their marginalization from society. Human resource potential aside, without education marginalized children may not be able to fulfil their rights as citizens in the largest democracy in the world. This suggests that the twin-track approach advocated by DFID (2000) may be a constructive way forward for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the Indian education system. While some programs could focus specifically on educational provision for children with disabilities, others could mainstream disability alongside gender and other exclusionary dimensions such as poverty. This would ensure the inclusion of all in programmes intended to expand the impact of institutional systems such as education. With the development of much-needed research into the inclusive education discourse and the performance and outcomes of IE policy, reconceptualization of inclusive education as a whole school quality issue for all children may be able to grow alongside this integration of agendas. Thus, EFA and the Fundamental Right to education for all children as declared by the 86th Constitutional amendment in 2002, may be satisfied in the long-term through the better implementation of inclusive education.

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