



## ENSURING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND QUALITY IN LEARNING OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS THROUGH INCLUSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

**Vandana Singh, Ph. D.**

Asso. Professor, School of Education, IGNOU



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*Education acts as an instrument of Socialization, helping the individual to internalize the structures and processes of society and learn those skills and attitudes, which will enable him to take a meaningful place in society and contribute to its well being. Also, it helps in developing the capacity for critical thinking hence becomes a catalyst for social change. What happens in a situation, if the education does not reach all? You would agree that there is a global concern on 'Education for All' without compromising the quality. With this comes a challenging task to respond to wide array of students with different needs .At the school level, inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all with a specific focus on those who are marginalized due to some disability. The regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (UNESCO, 1994). This has further restated in World Education Forum that school should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other conditions, (Dakar, 2000). Also, the Indian National Policy on Education (1986) and National Curriculum Framework for school education (2000) emphasized the need for integration of all children with special needs in the regular schools. Keeping in view the various recommendations, Inclusive education is the best approach. Inclusive education has been defined by UNESCO as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. This helps in building competencies in the teachers to deal with diverse population of students and to learn pedagogical strategies that facilitate learning of all students in their classroom. Hence, this approach will also help in meeting the goal of Right to education in a qualitative way. It is important that teacher education courses, therefore must respond for "preparing all teachers to teach all pupils" for all levels of education (preschool, primary*

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*and secondary). This paper makes an attempt to appraise the importance of inclusive teacher education programmes in the present context. More specifically, the paper attempts to ascertain how the concepts and strategies of inclusive education can be integrated and addressed in the teacher education curriculum to enable the co-existence of differently able.*

## **Introduction**

Diversity poses both a challenge and an opportunity for education. It is a challenge because policymakers and educators have to respond to the demands of disadvantaged groups in a way that education may present them a greater opportunity and parity with other groups in society.

It is an opportunity because a society that learns to live with diversity is likely to achieve faster rates of economic growth and social development (Alan Smith, 2010). For having an equal participation in building the knowledge society, first step is building an inclusive society. This will provide an opportunity to all individuals who have been socially excluded from various parts of society because of the limited access to key parts of social life such as the labour market, culture, leisure activities, social relations and education. In the process of exclusion these individuals gradually attach themselves to several other subsequent problems. It is thus a social phenomenon which is more complex and dynamic than that covered by the term social problem.

Education is potential enabler for the social participation of all individuals in the society; hence it must reach to all without exception. But there are certain groups (such as children with special needs) which just get neglected in the process; here technology could be great help.

## **Characteristics of Educational Systems in Diversity**

The diversity does not only promote development but also creates conflicts, which can be overcome by doing routine planning and continuous development in the mainstream education sector. This is important for the following three main reasons:

1. Education is a fundamental right that provides an important means of protection against discrimination, partly by providing children and young people with the knowledge and skills to access their rights and responsibilities.
2. Education is an essential tool for human development and eradication of poverty—an investment not only in individuals but also in social and economic development.

3. Education can be part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Policies and practice at all levels within the education system need to be analyzed in terms of their sensitivity to diversity.

### **Inclusive Education as a Human Right**

In India, despite having considerable achievements in the past 60 years in the education system, still have shortcomings, both at the elementary and higher levels, which hinder our country from becoming an active member in the knowledge society. Converting India into a knowledge society shall require, inter alia, addressing the issue of expansion, excellence and inclusion in education while formulating policies for achieving the same. (Knowledge Commission, 2006)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949), the United Nations General Assembly Charter (1959) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) all acknowledged education as a human right. As the commitment to achieve the goals of Education for All (EFA) by the year 2015, there has been a significant increase in the school attendance at primary-school level and a decrease in gender discrimination level. However, the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2008, 2009) indicates that not all of the goals associated with EFA will be reached by 2015. The report sends a warning to governments that they must tackle the problem of inequality in education, which exists due to not being able to provide equal opportunities to the children with special needs. It is important to say that this situation is sad when education is seen as process for an empowered and fulfilled life.

The World Conference on Education for All (1990) and the United Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) also re-stated that education is a basic right for *all* people and recognized that some groups were excluded. It was also pointed out that there was no specific mention of disabled children although the term “inclusive” does appear in the various frameworks for action proposed by various governments and other agencies. Therefore, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) questioned, where special education should be placed in relation to Education for All (EFA)? And it has called for “inclusion” in mainstream education to be the norm so that all children have the opportunity to learn - together.

Also, the Millennium Development Goals (2000) which targets towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and the achievement of universal primary education as its first two goals. It would be possible only when Inclusive Education (IE) as a strategy for reaching disabled children and adults and other marginalized or at risk groups. Hence, IE can be seen as both getting children *into* and *through* school by developing schools that are responsive to the actual, diverse needs of children and communities. IE is therefore about both access and quality and is a means for achieving these fundamental aspirations as highlighted in the EFA and MDG action frameworks.

When one talks about the inclusion, it is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education (Booth, 1996). The emphasis is on a process view of inclusion which facilitates flexibility of response with a priority which is in the best interest of the child/ young person involved. These changes which are made involve various changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies.

Thus, Inclusive Education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated in the mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims to enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem.

### **Inclusive Teacher Education as Systemic Change**

Inclusive education is defined by UNESCO as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. This means that all children have the right to a quality education that caters, to the extent possible, to their individual needs. Some countries have been successful in promoting inclusive education practices and policies that remove barriers and create conditions which enable all children to learn. However, in poorer developing countries, the process of creating an inclusive system is more difficult. Factors such as lack of available funding, administrative and policy level support, and trained personnel pose challenges that

can slow down progress.

To tackle the problem of untrained personnel, this approach calls for teachers to develop creative strategies that cater to the needs of their students. Because it is a holistic approach to teaching and learning, inclusion requires reforms and innovations in the curriculum of teacher preparation at the national level.

Stayton and McCollum (2002), in reviewing the limited research in this area, outline three models of teacher preparation for inclusive schools: (i) the additional model, (ii) the infusion model, and (iii) the unification model.

The additional model involved modifying existing courses or adding special education content in general teacher education curriculum. It is characterised by adding content primarily in the areas of characteristics of students with special needs and environmental and instructional strategies for including these children in the general education classroom. However, with the addition of special education content, it was reported that it is not sufficient to prepare teachers for students with disabilities in the general classroom (Stayton & McCollum 2002). The infusion model is characterised by team teaching by faculty from general and special education disciplines and joint supervision of field experiences.

The unifying model was first proposed by Pugach (1992) who argued for the unification of teacher education programs that have traditionally been designed to separate the preparation of general (mainstream) teachers and special education teachers. It demands a redesign of existing programs to effectively blend the streams of general and special education teacher preparation together (Pugach, 1996), which includes taking into account the common concerns and issues that teachers have about meeting the needs of diverse learners in their classes (Stainback, Stainback & Forest, 1989). In their exploratory study of pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion, Harvey et al. (2010) summarised that "in order to train pre-service teachers effectively in inclusive settings, the pre-service teacher education programs should develop a shared vision of program practice and philosophy, establish an integrated program, provide opportunities for special education and general education to work collaboratively.....". It is in this context that the collaborative consultation model as rationalised by Thousand et al. (1992) emerged as a process to enable people with diverse expertise to work together to educate students with diverse abilities and backgrounds in the general classrooms.

In order to build human resources in the field of education, training must be done both at the pre-service and in-service levels. Ideally, now the system requires an inclusive teacher education for all the levels. Also, from the perspective of RTE, it becomes all the more important to really take affirmative action in this direction.

### **Inclusive Teacher Education Curriculum: a frame work**

There is clear need of the inclusive teacher education curriculum, Avramidis et al.(2000) surveyed prospective teachers' beliefs about inclusion and found a general lack of confidence in their ability to meet the requirements of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). More recently, similar findings have been reported by Forlin (2001), Loreman (2002), Jobling and Moni (2004) Sharma, Ee and Desai (2003) Shippen et al. (2005) and Lambe and Bones (2006a). The OECD TALIS survey (2009) also found that teachers do not feel fully prepared to cope with the challenges of students with SEN. With this in mind, what should be included in initial teacher education for inclusion?

The UNESCO report 'Inclusive education: The way of the future' (op. cit.) proposes that a basic training curriculum for teachers might include advice about how to:

1. Translate relevant research findings (including brain research) into effective teaching practices;
2. Assess the progress of all students through the curriculum, including how to assess learners whose attainments are low and whose progress is slow;
3. Use assessments as a planning tool for the class as a whole, as well as in drawing up individual plans for students;
4. Observe students in learning situations, including the use of simple checklists and observation schedules;
5. Relate the behaviour of particular learners to normal patterns of development (particularly important for teachers of young children);
6. Involve parents and pupils in the assessment process;
7. Work with other professionals – and know when to call on their specialised advice and how to use their assessments for educational purposes.

It is important that the teacher education curriculum must focus on the following areas:

(a) Attitudes, beliefs and values about inclusiveness

The importance of positive attitudes of beginning teachers in inclusive settings has been well documented (Avramidis et al. 2000; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Hadadian and Chiang, 2007; Van Reusen et al., 2001). Therefore, it is important that both at pre-service and in-service teacher education must address to both development of the required skills and positive attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities. Atkinson (2004) and Forlin et al. (2009) found that if the negative attitudes of pre-service teachers are not addressed during initial teacher education, they may continue to hamper the progress of inclusive education efforts in schools. Further, Cook (2002) and Silverman (2007) pointed out that teachers' attitudes and beliefs directly affect their behaviour with students and so have a great influence on classroom climate and student outcomes

Attitudes are formed by experience as well as by implicit learning and may reflect an individual's personality (Zimbardo and Lieppe, 1991). Johnson and Howell (2009) suggest that attitudes may be seen to have three related components: cognitive (i.e., the idea or assumptions upon which the attitude is based), affective (i.e., feelings about the issue), and behavioural (i.e., a predisposition toward an action that corresponds with the assumption or belief) (Wood, 2000).

The question arises what should be included in the curriculum to develop such positive beliefs and attitudes? Molina (2006) demonstrated that theoretical classes and reading are not sufficient to modify teachers' and students' negative attitudes towards pupils with special educational needs. Loreman et al. (2007b) concluded that opportunities for direct interaction with people with disabilities, instruction on policy and legislation relating to inclusive education, and opportunities to provide practical teaching situations with students with disabilities.

Attitudes can be improved by increasing teacher students' knowledge about learners with disabilities and ways to meet their learning needs and this suggests to include more alternative learning styles and instructional strategies. Teacher candidates must not be led to believe that there is a single answer, or a single strategy, for supporting students and need to understand that no single model of education can ever truly make a classroom inclusive (Kumashiro, 2000).

The curriculum must also embrace inclusive values such as equality, rights, participation, learning, community, respect for diversity, trust and sustainability, compassion, honesty, courage and joy. This understanding of the values will give rise to our actions to 'do the right thing'.

#### (b) Inclusive Pedagogy

Alexander (2008) defines pedagogy as 'the observable act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications. It is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted'.

There must be a stress preparing a kind of teachers who know what to teach and how to teach, also know how to learn and make decisions informed by theory and research and by feedback from school and classroom evidence in particular contexts. Rink (2002) states that teachers in inclusive settings must provide the following for their students: developmentally appropriate content, clear instructions for practice, opportunities to practice at an appropriate level of difficulty, opportunities to participate in appropriately designed task progressions and accurate feedback and assessment of subject matter and role performance.

Although many studies highlight the key role of pedagogical training, they do not provide information on how much or what kinds of pedagogical preparation teachers need? Many successful strategies can be implemented to encourage prospective teachers to create inclusive classroom environments. Some successful practices may include the use of autobiographical storytelling, personal myths, and visual imagery. Another approach could be the use of action research projects to encourage novice educators to conceptualize creating inclusive communities (Cockrell et al., 1999).

Boling (2007) also suggested using case study method to encourage individuals to reflect upon and possibly change their prior assumptions and beliefs. For example, a pre-service teacher program uses structured fieldwork experiences and charges prospective teachers with the task of interviewing the community regarding Downs Syndrome (Campell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). In so doing, not only did teachers' beliefs about students with Down syndrome change, but also about the beliefs about inclusive environments in general.

#### (c) Teaching Practice



The importance of the practicum in any model of teacher education is stressed by Hagger and McIntyre (2006) who say: 'whatever student teachers need to learn to do as teachers in schools for their future careers, it is in schools that they need to learn to do these things'. It is important the teaching practice take place in the schools which have adopted the inclusive education in their schools and the students teachers must practice their theories and apply them in these settings.

### **Conclusion**

For the society to avoid conflict, it is essential that the quantity must not be substituted with quality and equality .In order to ensure both, it is important that we must look towards the approach which provides equal chance to the learners with different needs to participate meaningfully in learning. This could be possible when a unified approach to teacher education adopted.

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