ARE WE INCLUSION READY?

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"Inclusion is a right not a privilege for a select few"
- Judge Geary, Oberti v. Board of Education.

The meaning of the word Inclusion goes beyond including in a group or a structure, it starts with acceptance. We may have claims like we have equal male- female ratio, we admit or employ people with disabilities. However there are lots of questions to ask ourselves like are we accepting them as they are? Are we catering to their needs by providing disable friendly infrastructure and facilities? Are we treating them with the same dignity like others in the organization? So on and so forth. I am sure we don't have convincing answers to these questions.

Though adding a compulsory course titled 'Creating an inclusive school' in B.Ed. Program is definitely a positive step towards sensitizing future teacher about the existence of disability present in the classroom and measures to be taken to help them include in the main stream. However we still don't have answers to many of the questions asked by the student teachers like what can we do? Are we competent enough to handle these students with disabilities? What kind of support is available for me if I wish to help these children with special needs?

We need to understand that our strength lies in diversity and not similarity. There is a need for readiness assessment before taking any step towards creating inclusive classrooms and an inclusive society. An inclusive society is a society that over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures inclusion, equality of opportunity as well as capability of all members of the society to determine an agreed set of social institutions that govern social interaction. (Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Social Integration, Helsinki, July 2008)

On the one hand we see schools wherein students with disability are naturally accepted by other peers and cooperated with and on the other hand there are schools which are deliberately ignoring the whole existence of disabled students.

Let's try to understand the issue in the light of facts:

Population: According to census 2011 the percentage of person with disability to total population has grown from 2.13 (2001) to 2.21 (2011). Percentage of disabled persons is higher in rural areas than urban areas. Decadal increase in proportion is significant in urban areas (1.93 in 2001, 2.17 in 2011)

Employment: The National Sample Survey Organization of India reported that 74% of the disabled people were unemployed by 2003

Education: 2011 census data reveals that 45% of total disabled persons are illiterates. And only 5% are graduates and above. 36% of the total disabled persons are employed.

Numbers might be misleading at times but what matters more is the attitude and the acceptance.

Policy and implementation

Though policies encourage inclusion and everyone principally agrees with the concepts of inclusion there are hardly few schools who implement inclusion in its true spirit. There are schools which intentionally discourage children with disabilities from admitting in their schools. Reasons are numerous ranging from lack of availability of counselors to any unconvincing excuses. Shadow teachers are appointed but not given enough training. Even if some of them are trained and try to give some suggestions regarding required modifications, they are completely ignored. This is the experience of one of the international schools charging lacks of rupees per student. The agenda is to avoid getting disabled students so that they need not spend oncreating required accommodations for the disabled and can maintain their record of 100% results which they fear might be affected by admitting these disabled children. This shows that the gap between the policy document and its implementation needs consideration.

Empowering the disabled:

It will be interesting to know how many disabled people are in decision making positions. Mobility International USA has given a very important suggestion about involving local people with disabilities in decision making process of the multinational companies. According to the report "Active participation of people with disabilities in developmental projects not only broadens the diversity of people who are involved in development projects,

but also provides in-depth understanding of the local environment." Thus they can become valuable assets to the organizations they are working in.

Before even thinking about beginning to build inclusive society we should talk about inequality. Inequality caused by the nature, environment, heredity and us as members of the society. We also need to include poverty as economic inequality. According to Miles Corak, Professor of labour economics in University of Ottawa, Income inequality has the potential to erode inclusion as it restricts social mobility. He points out the different types of inequalities like education, health care, experience, esteem, expectations, motivation and support. We need to address these because it affects the wellbeing and development of disable people

As well-known economist Amartya Sen stated in his book Development as Freedom,"we all should live in a society in which we all have the freedom to choose the lives that we value." The society he expects will be created by creating equal opportunities for all on all the levels. The feeling of having life with value, respect and opportunities will make the disabled feel included and will help us moving towards inclusive society.

Inclusive society starts in the school. Therefore it is very important to teach children to co-exist without any discrimination against each other irrespective of the different abilities and disabilities. It's very positive picture when the students in some of the schools following inclusion, extend a helping hand to their disabled peers. They do this without feeling the burden of responsibility but more naturally and happily. This kind of future citizens will definitely make the society inclusive where everyone feels resected and valued.

We need to change our ways of addressing disability. There should be a shift in mindset from 'them' to 'us' as a group. More importance should be given to self-esteem and confidence than skills and grades. Teachers should be given training and support to create inclusive and integrate all the students in classroom activities. We need to create the education system which values all.

Attitudinal change:

Attitude remains the major barrier for the PWD. In words of Scott Hamilton "The only disability in life is a bad attitude."
According to a report by the charity sense in England (published on 23re Feb. 2016) "most parents of disables children find negative attitudes from other parents as a significant barrier

to accessing mainstream play. Disabled children and their parents are subsequently being excluded from communities."

People with disabilities often face various types of discrimination at various levels such as institutional, environmental and attitudinal. Institutional discrimination is when the people with disability and not enrolled in the school stating the reasons that there is no provision in the institution to cater to their needs. Environmental discrimination means that the physical environment creates a barrier for these people. Society has very low expectations from the people with disability which explains attitudinal discrimination. The assumptions such as the disabled people are unemployable; accommodating a disabled person is expensive needs to be addressed. There are low cost solutions available. For e.g. for a person using wheel chair there is a need for a ramp. This ramp may not be necessarily a permanent ramp but can be a portable ramp made up of simple wood available easily.

Training: while conducting training for the employees of any organization, themes like human rights perspective towards disability, misconceptions versus facts about people with disability, practical suggestions for creating inclusive organizational culture should be included.

Legal framework

People with disability should not be looked at as the object of charity, welfare etc. but they should be looked at as subjects with legal rights as any other citizen of the country. Their rights and needs should be given equal importance. The resources should be implied in such a way that all the individuals get opportunities for equal participation. Organizations should have clearly defined policies related to people with disabilities. People with disability should be included in framing the policies related to them. These people can help in better understanding of accommodation issues and come up with better workable policies.

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is understood as a process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities for all, regardless of their background, so that they can achieve their full potential in life. It is a multi-dimensional process aimed at creating conditions which enable full and active participation of every member of the society in all aspects of life, including civic, social, economic, and political activities, as well as participation in decisionmaking processes.

People with disability always face social exclusion. People around them look at them as liability. Society is eager to label them so that they can be segregated and discriminated against through all the possible categories of disability. They are hardly invited for social events. People use their doubts, bias against the PWD and fear to involve them in social events as this may demand additional arrangements and facilities which they may not be willing to do. Poverty and disability together gives rise to condition called as 'simultaneous deprivation'.

Dimensions of social inclusion are many ranging from individual to national and global.

Academic modifications

While taking about inclusion we need to take care of the needs of the students with disability. The material provided for these students must be made available in the alternate formats as applicable. For e.g. Braille, audios, pictures, videos with subtitles etc.

Access to the resources by the disabled people is the responsibility of all of us and it should reflect in our planning process.

Technological adaptations:

We need to embrace assistive and adaptive technological devices to promote better classroom interaction. We may utilize from varying range of low tech tools like pencil grips, book holders, texture boards to high tech electronic tools which are customized and will help in sophisticated communication and environmental control.

Simple modifications like adding captions to audios, providing educationally relevant description audios for pictures and graphical layouts will help to a very large extent.

Conclusion:

Together we all have responsibility to create atmosphere which is disabled friendly. Only then we will able to make this world beautiful as mentioned by Jimmy Carter who says "We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams."

References

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