

Inclusion – A myth or a reality -- unravelling the dilemma

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Introduction

Developing countries, like India, find themselves today, wittingly or unwittingly, in the midst of a raging controversy. Have special schools outlived their utility? Do such schools necessarily breed segregation and seclusion? Are we almost blindly imitating the foreign concepts of integration and inclusion, without creating necessary conditions conducive to educational development of children with visual impairment? Does 'inclusive education' really result in genuine 'inclusion'? Do our children get any form of reasonable access to such vital educational inputs as books in Braille or enlarged print, basic writing and computing devices and trained teachers, in scores of so called 'inclusive education' settings in most developing countries? Can we not think of some new and innovative strategies/models to secure equality of educational opportunities for our children with visual impairment? Must we think in terms of one system supplanting or elbowing out the other? Can't the two converge and coexist as equal partners, not as one being superior to the other? These are issues, which form the focal point of our attention in the succeeding paragraphs.

Much of what is stated hereinafter is based on our Indian situation, yet we feel that the Indian experience could hold out useful lessons for many other developing countries.

Present Status

India has come a long way since the establishment of the first institution for the blind in 1887 to date; from just 32 institutions in undivided India to over 300 educational programmes and institutions at present. We also have the possibility of having special intervention strategies in place in almost every District throughout the country, under Government's Scheme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Education For All). What, then has been the net outcome?

Certainly, we are among the largest manufacturers of educational aids and appliances for the blind among developing countries. We adopted a standardized Braille Code for all Indian languages over 55 years ago. We, today, have a number of very high-speed computerized Braille Presses capable of producing Braille at the amazing speed of 400 characters a second. The number of special institutions for the blind has gone up more than ten times after Independence. We have been running schemes of integrated education (now inclusive education), ever since 1974. Our Rehabilitation Council of India, a statutory body, lays down courses of training for professionals and ensures maintenance of proper standards, which is something not available in many other developing countries.

However, there is a flip side to the situation also. The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), a Government of India body, in their 58th Round (July - December 2002) carried out an extensive survey of disabled persons. The Survey Report reveals, inter-alia, that the levels of illiteracy amongst the visually disabled are second highest in all disability groups, the highest being among persons with mental retardation. According to this Report, despite all our efforts, so far, only 23-26% of visually disabled persons are literate. These findings are further corroborated by the enumeration of disabled persons undertaken during the Decennial Census of India, 2001. Also, it is believed that only about 25-30% of visually disabled children in the age-range of 6 - 14 years, are currently receiving education of one form or the other. It is estimated that only 9% of our disabled youngsters are able to complete secondary education. Further, the poignancy of the situation is that the quality of education received by this limited percentage of visually impaired children is far from being satisfactory. Research studies carried out in the 80's and 90's have shown that blind children receive very limited training in such basic compensatory skills as Braille, daily living skills, personal management, mobility etc. in many programs of integrated education (Punani, 1997).

So, we find that we are faced with a two-fold challenge insofar as inclusion of visually impaired children is concerned. Firstly, we still have an appallingly large number of children with visual impairment who are outside the reach of our educational programs and, secondly, we have to make systematic and deliberate efforts to make significant quality-improvement and upgradation.

We shall, now, turn our attention to addressing these crucial challenges.

Required Conceptual Orientation:

We must at the beginning itself, clarify in unambiguous terms the concept of 'Inclusion' and its implications in respect of visually impaired children, in particular, as well as the oft-quoted misgivings about residential schools.

Inclusion: The Salamanca Statement, adopted at the World Conference, organized by UNESCO in 1994, issued a clarion call for including all children--disadvantaged and disabled--in regular schools, unless there were compelling reasons for doing otherwise. The Statement explains: "Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and, ultimately, the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system."

Thus, inclusion does not only denote access to schools for visually impaired and other children with disabilities, but must also lead to success through improved functioning of the general school system.

It may also be noted that we are, currently, observing in this country, the Extended UN ESCAP Decade of the Disabled (2003-2012). A detailed developmental agenda has been adopted for persons with disabilities for the Decade. Popularly known as "The BIWAKO Millennium Framework For Action", it calls upon governments to actively make a paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based programme for the development of persons with disabilities and to move towards the human rights perspective in all matters pertaining to the educational and socio-economic development of persons with disabilities. Thus, inclusion, today, is not just an academic issue. It is to be viewed as a matter of basic human right for visually impaired and other disabled children, marking an important shift from charity to legal recognition, from welfare to acceptance of legitimate rights and freedoms, from exclusion to participation.

International Instruments: A couple of international mandates also deserve mention, here. The UN General Assembly through its path-breaking Resolution 48/96, 20th December 1993, has adopted the "Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons With Disabilities". Rule 6 of the document, dealing with Education calls upon all governments to promote education for all children with disabilities, since there can be no equalization of opportunities for disabled persons, if they do not have access to quality education that will provide them with the means for empowerment. For this purpose, the Rule stipulates that all children with disabilities should have easy access to physical environment in schools and that teaching and instruction methods and material should be readily available as per the child's requirements (Hissa Al-Thani, Special Rapporteur on Disability, 2004).

We also have before us the Draft Convention on Disability. Its Draft Article on Education recognizes that all member-countries shall allow education to all children with disabilities as a matter of human right. All children will have the option of choosing educational settings most suited to their specific needs and interests, (A.K.Mittal, 2004).

Thus, it would be seen that both of these international documents lay great stress on 'Inclusion', on providing educational services for all children with disabilities, though neither of them prescribes any single option as a panacea to all problems of school-enrollment and success.

Obviously, then, inclusion to be practical must be rights-based and also provide for visually impaired children an environment in the school, which is:

- a) Accessible;
- b) Enabling and
- c) Enriching.

Residential Set-up: Special residential schools have, through the years, being subjected, many times rightly, to a great deal of criticism, even condemnation. However, it has to be recognized that these schools can be as good as their administrators choose to make them. Segregation and isolation need not be inevitable offshoots of such systems. Countries like India have a long tradition of residential schools in mainstream education as well as in advanced technical and management education. We just cannot discard these schools only because these have been given up or their importance diluted in advanced countries. Our situation happens to be very different, socially, economically, even geographically.

Targets

The Persons With Disabilities Act of India stipulates that every child with a disability must have access to free education in an appropriate environment till the age of 18 years. The Government of India's SSA Scheme 'Education For All' envisaged that all children including children with special needs complete five years of primary schooling by 2007 and that all children (should again include disabled children) complete 8 years of elementary schooling by 2010.

'The Biwako Millennium Framework For Action' to which our Government is a signatory, lays down the following important targets:

- A) At least 75% of disabled children of school age should complete a full course of primary schooling by 2010;
- B) All children and youth with disabilities should complete a full course of primary schooling, by the year 2015;
- C) All infants and young children (0 to 4 years old) should have access to and receive community-based early intervention services by the year 2012.

Two more documents merit mention here. A Comprehensive Action Plan For Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities prepared by the Government of India lays down that all disabled children will be part of suitably equipped mainstream schools

by 2020. Similarly, the recently announced National Policy for Persons With Disabilities has the goal of ensuring that every child with disability has access to appropriate pre-school, primary and secondary level education by 2020.

It would thus be seen that our targets here have ultimately zeroed on to the year 2020 in so far as universalization of elementary and secondary education for children with disabilities is concerned – a most laudable, but highly challenging and arduous task.

Basic Preparation

For inclusion to be really meaningful, we have to ensure that its benefits do not remain just book-bound, but do actually reach out to all visually impaired children. Mere proximity of blind children with their sighted counterparts, limited as it has been, is no inclusion. Let us not seize upon the concept of inclusion too eagerly, without ensuring at least some basic preparation.

It is relevant to quote here from a Paper prepared by some Nordic blindness organisations, which has equal relevance to our situation: “Grandiose statements about integrated education for blind and partially sighted children, young and adults, are not enough. The basis of true integration is that visually handicapped persons are given the skills necessary to ensure their full participation as opposed to their mere presence in the regular educational system.”

ICEVI and the World Blind Union (WBU) in a joint statement support “Inclusive education as one of the alternative models of service delivery, on condition that all necessary steps are taken to first put in place the required number of teachers trained in the special needs of blind and low vision children and the essential support systems--necessary equipment, Braille textbooks, low vision devices--are available to guarantee true inclusion.”

This means that as a first step to inclusion, we must have some pre-launch preparation for visually impaired children.

Early Intervention: We must start with early detection and assessment. There has to be much greater interaction and coordination between grass-root workers available in villages, families of blind children and rehabilitation personnel available in the district as well as organizations of the blind. An institution for the blind or a training centre functioning at the District Headquarters, could work as a nodal and coordinating agency with necessary support from trained social workers and others.

What we need is a convergent approach involving Government Departments, available rehab personnel and families of visually impaired children to produce the required synergy of effort and action.

The Plan:

Rationale: As mentioned earlier, we have schools for the blind in most districts of the country. The Government's SSA – Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan – (Education For All) programme provides for the recruitment of two or more special teachers/educators to look after education of children with disabilities in the concerned district. Yet, the problem is that most of the teachers being thus recruited under SSA programme are not especially trained in the education of blind and low vision children. They have had limited exposure to such components as a part of the course in special education attended by them. Thus, it is neither fair nor appropriate to expect such special teachers to provide the required systematic and intensive training in compensatory/plus curriculum skills (Braille, orientation & mobility, daily living skills, special equipment, low vision devices etc.) to visually impaired children under their charge.

We cannot, of course, recommend the appointment of separate full-time special teachers for visually impaired children in every district under SSA programme. The alternative strategy being suggested, here, is based on the principle of active partnership between special schools, available in most districts, and SSA special teachers. The model we propose is, thus, based on this continuing and close partnership.

Components: Our model has the following components:

- A) Visually impaired children of the preschool and school age may be identified by the village level functionaries such as those engaged in Integrated Child Development Scheme of the Government, under the supervision of special SSA teachers, wherever available.
- B) Parents of children thus identified may be provided necessary counseling by ICDS workers/special SSA teachers, if available and necessary support facilities may be provided to them through Panchayat (local self-government) leaders and officials.
- C) Identified children may be suitably prepared to enter a nearby ICDS nursery / balwadi, if available or a nearby SSA school, as the case may be, with the intervention of special teachers or, if they are not available, by village functionaries, opinion leaders and a representative of the institution for the blind in the District.
- D) The concerned village level functionaries may be required, as an essential part of their documentation work, to submit details of work undertaken by them for visually impaired children and their parents, in their reports to the concerned higher authorities.
- E) All eligible visually impaired children must be admitted to the nearest SSA school or a special school, as per need, the task of assessment to be undertaken by representatives of a special school and SSA teachers.

- F) Cooperation of the staff of the nearby institution for the blind may be enlisted actively to impart intensive training in plus curriculum activities, to visually impaired children attending regular schools.
- G) To facilitate the required comprehensive training, all visually impaired children enrolled in regular schools in a given cluster of districts, may be brought to a special school for the blind for the period of vacations-- summer vacation (about 6 weeks), autumn break (about 2 weeks) and winter vacation (about 2 weeks). They would thus get about 10 weeks of intensive training in the year.
- H) Thus, it would be possible to provide necessary compensatory skills training to every visually impaired student through the intervention of specialists at a special school, something which could not have been possible otherwise.
- I) Funding as per specific norms, may be made available for the suggested intensive training at the special schools to cover costs of board and lodging for visually impaired children and some allowance to the trainers.
- J) The special SSA teachers, or in their absence, some regular school teachers, may be entrusted the task of follow-up and monitoring the application of skills learnt by the visually impaired students during training in the preceding vacation.
- K) There should be provision for suitable sensitization of functionaries and officials like ICDS/Village workers, panchayat (local self government) leaders, teachers and headmasters of regular schools having blind children and education officers of the concerned districts. Such programmes should be planned in close consultation with organizations of the blind and conducted with the help of teachers from special schools, as far as possible.
- L) A mechanism may be worked out to ensure proper follow-up so that information and insights gained through such programs are not lost after attendance.
- M) A checklist of basic Braille-writing, computing, mobility, recreational and low vision devices may be worked out in advance by all SSA and other schools, where visually impaired children are likely to be enrolled in consultation with organizations / institutions of and for the blind. These devices may be obtained well in time and made available to the students for training at the special school and then for use in the regular school.
- O) Suitable courses need to be worked out through the distance education mode to provide secondary education to such visually impaired children as were not able to progress beyond the stage of primary education.

Research

There is also a pressing need for undertaking R&D projects for ensuring proper monitoring and evaluation of services concerning inclusive education of children with

visual impairment. The following is a suggested list of areas in which such research efforts are urgently required:

- I. Enrolment and retention of visually impaired children in SSA schools and problems being encountered;
- II. A comparative assessment of performance of visually impaired children in regular schools and residential set ups for suggesting improvement;
- III. Preparation of suitable and easily accessible material--video films, posters, reading material in local languages--for generating greater awareness about visual disability;
- IV. Evaluation of the impact of sensitization programmes conducted so far by various organisations, for different officials and functionaries;
- V. Development of suitable material for parent counseling and parent support;
- VI. Preparation of low cost teaching-learning material for visually impaired children in regular schools.

Conclusion

We, thus find that a convergent approach making judicious use of resources and ensuring close coordination, suitable follow up, research, monitoring and evaluation hold the key to meaningful and accelerated inclusion of visually impaired children. A new phase of collaboration and partnership between SSA and special schools is the need of the hour. Our targets must be realistic, our strategies clear and focused. The government, the community and organisations of blind persons themselves must all be closely and collectively associated with this challenging task of converting inclusion into a visible reality for visually impaired children.

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