

## A note on Inclusive Education

Historically, attempts towards development and ensuring equality and justice for all have commonly been found to conform to the norms and systems of the majority. Most of these attempts have articulated the need for inclusion of all segments of the society – however, in most cases this articulation took the form of ‘special care systems’ that ultimately led to further exclusion of these communities – physically, mentally and psychologically. For a variegated and multi-segment society like India it is even more common.

CRY, having taken cognizance of this phenomenon, has continually made efforts through the range of interventions to include all segments (social, cultural and economic) in the collective battle for child rights. More specifically, CRY has been advocating for a Common School System (CSS) that has as its bedrock the principles of equality, justice and inclusion. CSS has been defined from varied perspectives reflecting on the diverse backgrounds, knowledge base, skills, concepts, ideologies and experiences of people and institutions involved. An attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of CSS was made while proposing to the CABE Committee on ‘Free and Compulsory Education’ as follows – ‘Common School System means the National System of Education that is founded on the principles of equality and social justice as enshrined in the Constitution and provides education of a comparable quality to all children in an equitable manner irrespective of their caste, creed, language, gender, economic or ethnic background, location or disability (physical or mental), and wherein all categories of schools – i.e. government, local body or private, both aided and unaided, or otherwise – will be obliged to

- (a) Fulfill certain minimum infrastructural (including those relating to teachers and other staff), financial, curricular, pedagogic, linguistic and socio-cultural norms and
- (b) ensure free education to the children in a specified neighbourhood from an age group and/or up to a stage, as may be prescribed, while having adequate flexibility and academic freedom to explore, innovate and be creative and appropriately reflecting the geo-cultural and linguistic diversity of the country, within the broad policy guidelines and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education as approved by the Central Advisory Board of Education.<sup>1</sup>

What is also available for public reference is the recommendation of The Education Commission (1964 – 66) that clearly indicates the intent of The Commission to look at CSS as an effective instrument to build a society grounded on the principles of equality and social justice. For actualizing this, what is necessary is acceptance of the principle of ‘Inclusion’ and percolation of the same across all levels of society.

Discourses on the principles of social inclusion and exclusion are integral to any debate and dialogue on the principles of justice and equality. Over time the element of ‘Inclusion’ has been incorporated into the mainstream discussion on Education Policy as well. Common ways of thinking about inclusion and exclusion<sup>2</sup> are:

- **Inclusion as a right:** Since the 1950s there has been increasing dissatisfaction, amongst educators in many countries, with the practice of ‘special education’ which separates so-called ‘disabled’ or ‘different’ children from the rest of society and educates them in different schools. Special education is seen as simply reinforcing problematic inequalities and exclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> A Compilation of Notes on Common School System by Prof Anil Sadgopal presented at the meeting of CABE at New Delhi in July 2005.

<sup>2</sup> ID 21 – Communicating Development Research – Approaches to Inclusive Education.

- **Inclusion as effective:** This argues that inclusive schools are more cost-efficient, socially beneficial and educationally effective than segregated special schools. Proponents criticize 'special education' programmes as unsuccessful.
- **Inclusion as political:** Marginalized groups, such as scheduled tribes or castes in India or indigenous peoples, view the inclusion of their special interests and needs within mainstream education as a political priority. Inclusion is a means to redress power imbalances and to secure a greater share of resources, representation and involvement in society.

Inclusion may also be looked at as –

- **A philosophy** built on the belief that all people are equal and should be respected and valued, as an issue of basic human rights.
- **An 'unending set of processes'** in which children and adults with 'disabilities' have the opportunity to participate fully in ALL community activities accessible to people who do not have disabilities.

Inclusive education means that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community. Inclusive Education is an education system that changes to fit the individual child that addresses all types of individual needs, not just disability and focuses on classroom management, capacity building of teachers and building conducive learning environment. Philosophy of inclusion hinges on helping students and teachers become better members of a community by creating new visions for communities and for schools. Inclusion is about membership and belonging to a community. Inclusion is based on the belief that people/adults work in inclusive communities, work with people of different races, religions, aspirations, abilities. In the same vein, children of all ages should learn and grow in environments that resemble the environments that they will eventually work in. **When good inclusion is in place, the child who needs the inclusion does not stand out.**

Parallel to multiple connotations and interpretations of the principle of 'Inclusions' there are **certain prominent concerns** that can be identified. These are particularly relevant in the context of a variegated and diversified society like India and hence it warrants particular care and attention of policy makers and policy advocates. One should remember that any attempt to 'include' necessarily involves some form of exclusion – hence it is imperative to plan out the management of potential exclusionary forces and outcomes in advance. Generally it is observed that social policies thinking about inclusion and exclusion often operate with an over-simplified understanding of what 'normal' society is, in relation to which 'other' non-normal groups, communities and individuals are identified, positioned and the level of their inclusion or exclusion assessed. By viewing society as made up of collections of groups and communities, this way of thinking also tends to ignore the differences of individuals within each of those normal/non-normal groups. Furthermore, one of the main critiques of social exclusion is its 'one-size-fits-all' approach which assumes that social inequality can be overcome by providing the same opportunities equally for all citizens. While this would go a long way towards correcting historic imbalances and injustices, it is short-sighted. One size does not fit all simply because citizens are not all the same, neither are they located in identical and stable social, economic and political positions.

In India, as in most other countries, the term Inclusive Education is largely interpreted as generating special facilities and provisions for the education of the 'physically and mentally challenged children'. This understanding certainly brings to focus the special needs of challenged children and the need to define and carve out special systems for such children so that they are not excluded from education that all other 'non-challenged' children get access to. However, what this argument fails to highlight upon is the plight of the large

segment of children from rural, indigenous and economically poor communities who are totally marginalized and excluded from the regular education system either because of inadequate access or inappropriate infrastructure or poor quality of curriculum and pedagogy. The Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities 2005 defines Inclusive Education as 'In its broadest and all encompassing meaning, inclusive education, as an approach, seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. It implies all learners, young people - with or without disabilities being able to learn together through access to common pre-school provisions, schools and community educational setting with an appropriate network of support services. This is possible only in a flexible education system that assimilates the needs of a diverse range of learners and adapts itself to meet these needs. It aims at all stakeholders in the system (learners, parents, community, teachers, and administrators, policy makers) to be comfortable with diversity and see it as a challenge rather than a problem.' However, while articulating the goals and strategies of the action plan, a clear emphasis is laid on children and youth with disabilities as defined under the Persons with Disability Act (1995) and the National Trust Act (1999).

Today policy makers and policy advocates both agree that in the Indian context, 'Inclusive Education' has to go beyond the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 1994)<sup>3</sup> to transcend the issue of disability. It must concern itself with all marginalized sections of society viz. Dalits, tribals and indigenous people, religious and linguistic minorities, child labour and of course, the physically and mentally disabled and particularly the girls in each of these categories, whom the school system tends to exclude in substantial proportions.

Research has shown that Inclusive education results in improved social development and academic outcomes for all learners. It leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions because learners are exposed to real environment in which they have to interact with other learners each one having unique characteristics, interests and abilities. The non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes and actions towards learners with disabilities as a result of studying together in an inclusive classroom. Thus, inclusive education lays the foundation to an inclusive society accepting, respecting and celebrating diversity<sup>4</sup>.

Globally much research and deliberation has been happening on the issue of Inclusive Education. The Dakar Framework for Action adopted a *World Declaration on Education for All* (EFA) in 2000, which affirmed the notion of education as a fundamental right and established the new millennium goal to provide every girl and boy with primary school education by 2015. EFA also clearly identified Inclusive Education as one of the key strategies to address issues of marginalization and exclusion. The fundamental principle of EFA is that all children should have the opportunity to learn. The fundamental principle of Inclusive Education is that all children should have the opportunity to learn *together*.

Despite the common experience of economic pressures and constraints among countries of the North and South, the literature related to economic issues in Inclusive Education emphasizes different aspects of economic reform. The plethora of large-scale, cross-country

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<sup>3</sup> The Framework of Action on Special needs Education, endorsed by the 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations who met at Salamanca, Spain, clearly articulates the term 'special educational needs' refers to all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties.

<sup>4</sup> Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities, August 20, 2005.

studies undertaken by countries of the North typically focus on national and municipal government funding formulas for allocation of public monies. In countries of the South, the literature on resource support for inclusive education services focuses instead on building the capacity of communities and parents as significant human resource inputs, and on nongovernmental sources of funding. This literature also tends to be case-based on particular countries, regions or programs, rather than large-scale, multi-national studies as in the North. Strategies for resourcing Inclusive Education in countries of the South are much more varied and broader in scope— characterized by a focus on linking and coordinating services with health sectors, universities, community based rehabilitation programs and vocational training programs, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Some CRY experiences may be illustrated, in this context, with a view to exhibit the strategies adopted by grassroots interventions.

### **Prayas, Jaipur**

Prayas – Vocational Institute for Mentally Handicapped, located at Jaipur, Rajasthan has been working to rehabilitate and socially mainstream children with special needs in the area of mental health. The basic objective of this organization is to integrate children with mental challenges into the mainstream by promoting the concept of ‘Inclusive Education’. They also work for creating supportive political and social environment for children with mental challenges. The key intervention strategies adopted by Prayas include –

- Preventive approach – detection and investigation of cases of mental challenge, health and RCH disorders etc;
- Promotional approach – basic education, non-formal education and employment based training;
- Advocacy – dialoguing with state and national governments on special needs of challenged children, networking among NGOs and policy level advocacy and mobilization of community for wider sensitization; and
- Integration of challenged children in mainstream society.

The benefits derived include increased awareness and acceptance of challenged children both by their parents and larger community as also an increased sensitivity of normal children towards mentally challenged children. Getting educated together under one roof has enabled an understanding about the special needs of mentally challenged children and accepting them as dignified human beings. This in turn enabled the retention of and increased learning abilities among the mentally challenged children.

### **Mon Foundation, Kolkata**

The interventions of Mon Foundation aim at protecting and promoting child rights through mental health and life skills education, creating an environment sensitive to mental health and integrating mental health in the spectrum of disability and Inclusive Education. The intervention, having started with focus on research to understand the prevalence of mental health problems and having gone through a strategic shift, currently emphasizes inclusion of non-school going children (eg – children living in slums and on railway platforms), training of care givers for Children In Need Of Care And Protection, advocacy with policy makers and opinion leaders and further research into the area of mental health and Inclusive Education. Mon Foundation believes that the term development does not mean only physical development. Development in this context should be interpreted in a broad sense, adding qualitative dimensions of mental, emotional, cognitive, social and cultural development.

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<sup>5</sup> Inclusive education: achieving Education For All by including those with disabilities and special education needs – Prepared by Susan J. Peters for The Disability Group, The World Bank.

Hence the focus on life skill education with a view to ensure fulfillment of Right to Life with Dignity for all.

The advocacy efforts of Mon have helped in gaining recognition for the organization among State Government departments - The Board of Primary Education has incorporated the issues of mental health into their Teachers' training manual. The Board of Secondary Education has shown positive interest in including Life skills into the curriculum. The SCERT, the Department of Science and Technology, the Council for Higher Education etc have all shown interest and support for Mon's activities.

However, globally still many countries feel the need to maintain some form of segregated provision—either special classes in regular schools or special schools. (Most frequently cited as needing segregated placement were students with emotional and behavior problems—as schools are reporting a growing number of problems in this area.) Further, in most countries, Inclusive Education programming is limited, but there is a definite trend toward increased Inclusive Education.

The fact that there is a dominant articulating principle of exclusion does not or should not undermine the prevalence of other levels of injustice. To do so would risk the introduction of further modes of exclusion through, for example, homogenization of differences, or the dangerous ignorance of vested interests. An example of this can be seen in critiques of some forms of multicultural education in the ways in which they emphasize aspects of difference but in the last resort assert the legitimacy of a dominant cultural order.<sup>6</sup> In these approaches, social exclusion initiatives operate around somewhat crude categorizations of various social groups in relation to power and access to goods and services. When thinking about social inclusion in education and developing policy to aid it, it is necessary to consider the highly complex ways in which race, class, gender and other categories intersect and inter-relate to produce unique individual and group experiences.

Unless this exclusionary character of Indian education is challenged, both theoretically and in practice, by application of the principles of Inclusive Education, the Common School System would never become a reality.

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<sup>6</sup> ID 21 – Communicating Development Research – Approaches to Inclusive Education.