"Perspectives in Inclusive Education"

Dr. Satender Narwal

Principal, Mukhi College of Education,

Gohana District Sonipat

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in India has become a significant shift in the country's educational landscape, providing equitable opportunities for all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or socio-economic status. Policy initiatives like the Right to Education Act (2009) mandate free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14, while the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) program aims to bridge access and quality gaps. However, challenges such as resource constraints, insufficient teacher training, attitudinal barriers, and a lack of accessible infrastructure, inclusive teaching materials, and specialized support services hinder the effective inclusion of children with diverse needs. Cultural and societal attitudes, such as stigma and discrimination against individuals with disabilities, also pose challenges. The future of inclusive education in India requires comprehensive teacher training programs, inclusive curricula development, adequate resources, and collaborative efforts involving government bodies, educational institutions, NGOs, and communities.

Keywords: Inclusive education, challenges, prospects, India

1.0   Introduction:

Inclusive education means that all children, regardless of their ability level, are included in a mainstream classroom, or the most appropriate or least restrictive environment (LRE), that students of all ability levels are taught as equals, and that teachers must adjust their curriculum and teaching methodologies so that all students benefit. This also avoids wasting resources, and "shattered hopes," which often occur in classrooms that are "one size fits all.

Studies have shown that truly inclusive systems reduce drop-out rates and repetition of grades, and have higher average levels of achievement, compared to systems that are not inclusive. People who believe in inclusive education believe that the education system impedes learning for a child and that every child is capable of learning.

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1171

1.1   Understanding Inclusive Education in the Indian Context:

Inclusion is not a new concept in India; we had been including children with disabilities in mainstream education unknowingly and were supporting them with common sense methods. That is the reason we see a good number of people with disabilities included naturally in society here and there. As far as India is concerned, general education itself had and still has innumerable problems such as poverty, child labour, gender bias etc.

It is now widely acknowledged that to achieve the goal of universal education in India and tofulfil provisions laid out in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009) the education of children with disabilities cannot be put on the back burner. Inclusion or the education of children with disabilities in regular classrooms must be adopted both as an ideology and as a practical solution to support the Education for All adages, and to bring about equity in education in India.

The teachers were ready to take up challenges, maintained good rapport with the community and had a say in the village. Those who enter into the stream of education were groomed irrespective of their personal, social, economic and psychological limitations by the teachers. Each student of a teacher in a rural area was different from the others. The teacher had to practice different strategies to encourage, educate and retain the students in the system of education. They practiseda holistic approach to ensure all-round development. It is surprising to note that we ought to speak a lot about inclusive education in India.

1.2   Policy Support for Inclusive Education:

As mentioned earlier, inclusive education has been embraced in policy and principle as the way forward by all major establishments related to school education in India in general and disability in particular in the last two decades. In India, schemes such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children, IEDC (1974) launched by the Government of India and the Project Integrated Education of Disabled Children, PIED, launched during the Sixth Five Year Plan (1985-1989), had laid the foundation for inclusive education to be adopted at least in principle. The IEDC scheme was replaced by the Inclusive Education of the Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) in 2008 (NUEPA, 2009). The Persons with Disability Act (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) 1995 emphatically stated the need for equal opportunities for persons with disability and directed state and local authorities to take appropriate action towards meeting the goal. The Rights of Persons with Disability Bill, 2012 directs educational institutions to provide inclusive education to children with a disability concerning admission, identification, infrastructure, teacher training, social and academic

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1172

development, educational aids, curriculum and examination reforms (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2011).

The National Policy for Persons with Disability, 2006, attempts to clarify the framework under which the state, civil society and private sector must operate to ensure a dignified life for persons with disability and support for their caregivers. It includes extending rehabilitation services to rural areas, increasing trained personnel to meet needs, emphasizing education and training, increasing employment opportunities, focusing on gender equality, improving access to public services, encouraging state governments to develop a comprehensive social security policy, ensuring equal opportunities in sports, recreation and cultural activities, increasing the role of civil society organizations as service-providers to persons with disability and their families.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play an active role in the provision of services for people with disabilities including education for children with disabilities since the early 1950s, particularly in urban areas. The NGOs are supported by the government through various grants. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an increase in the number of NGOs in India (UNICEF 2003). Some of these NGOs are making consistent efforts towards including children with disabilities in regular educational settings.

However, even though support for inclusive education in India looks promising in policy, it cannot be overemphasized that the incongruity between policy and practice remains an unfathomable challenge. The mere existence of ambitious goals in policy has not ensured their expression such as to reach anywhere near the desired results. Perhaps, it is in the light of this realistic situational analysis that some voices have arisen in support of the co-existence of special education facilities along with different models of inclusive education practices. Although a debate on factors responsible for the ineffectiveness of the system is warranted, it is not the focus of this paper. On the other hand, this paper attempts to build a case for individual effort on the part of schools to provide inclusive education facilities within their regular settings.

2.0   Barriers to Inclusive Education in India

- **Attitudes:** Societal norms often are the biggest barrier to inclusion. Old attitudes die hard, and many still resist the accommodation of students with disabilities and learning issues, as well as those from minority cultures. Prejudices against those with differences can lead to discrimination, which inhibits the educational process. The challenges of inclusive education might be blamed on the student's challenges instead of the shortcomings of the educational system.

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1173

- **Physical Barriers:** In some areas, students with physical disabilities are expected to attend schools that are inaccessible to them. In economically deprived school systems, especially rural areas, dilapidated and poorly cared-for buildings can restrict accessibility. Many schools don't have the facilities to properly accommodate students with special needs, and local governments lack either the funds or the resolve to provide financial help. Environmental barriers can include doors, passageways, stairs and ramps, and recreational areas. These can create a barrier for some students to simply enter the school building or classroom.

- **Curriculum:** A rigid curriculum that does not allow for experimentation or the use of different teaching methods can be an enormous barrier to inclusion. Study plans that don't recognize different styles of learning hinder the school experience for all students, even those not traditionally recognized as having physical or mental challenges.

- **Teachers:** Teachers who are not trained or who are unwilling or unenthusiastic about working with differently-abled students are a drawback to successful inclusion. Training often falls short of real effectiveness, and instructors already straining under large workloads may resent the added duties of coming up with different approaches for the same lessons.

- **Language and Communication:** Many students are expected to learn while being taught a new language and in some cases unfamiliar to them. This is a significant barrier to successful learning. Too often, these students face discrimination and low expectations.

- **Socio-economic factors:** Areas that are traditionally poor and those with higher-than-average unemployment rates tend to have schools that reflect that environment, such as run-down facilities, students who are unable to afford necessities and other barriers to the learning process. Violence, poor health services and other social factors create barriers even for traditional learners, and these challenges make inclusion all but impossible.

- **Funding:** Adequate funding is a necessity for inclusion and yet it is rare. Schools often lack adequate facilities, qualified and properly trained teachers and other staff members, educational materials and general support. Sadly, lack of resources is pervasive throughout many educational systems.

- **Organization of the Education System:** Centralized education systems are rarely conducive to positive change and initiative. Decisions come from the school system's high-level authorities whose initiatives focus on employee compliance more than quality

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1174

learning. The top levels of the organization may have little or no idea about the realities teachers face daily.

- **Policies as Barriers:** Many policymakers don't understand or believe in inclusive education, and these leaders can stonewall efforts to make school policies more inclusive. This can exclude whole groups of learners from the mainstream educational system, thereby preventing them from enjoying the same opportunities for education and employment afforded to traditional students.

3.0 How to Remove Barriers in Inclusive Education

- **Teachers' attitude:** "Where there is a will, there is a way"; it's true in the case of the education of a child with special needs in a mainstream school. More than the techniques, equipment, aids and amenities the major causative factor for a fuller, broader and a healthy inclusion.The teacher training institutions, let it be pre-service training or in-service training, locus rests upon bringing in an optimistic spirit amongst the teachers. The teachers should also be given enough room to brood uponthe problems of the children in their busy schedule.

- **Rigid curriculum:**The teachers should be trained to develop Individualized Educational Plans accommodating the curriculum and the needs of the child, putting them on one line. This becomes a tough job when the curriculum becomes rigid. This rigidity does not permit the teachers to provide enough space for the child with a special need in her class. In most cases, the teachers break through the curriculum and modify it to the extent possible to help the children meet their realistic needs through education. Many of the children with special needs need functional academics to lead a hassle-free life.

- **Rigid methods of Teaching:** To solve the common problems of education, new methods and strategies are suggested from time to time by the government. However, they fail to understand the kind of difficulties the children with special needs undergo. The strategies and methods should be more accommodative.

- **Peer support:** The greater boon to inclusion is peer support. The peers are taking an active part in the education of their classmates whohave special needs. The personnel should encourage and tap the support. The child with a special need enjoys the company of his peer, socializes and vents his grievances. Not only the physical inclusion become possible with the cooperation of peers but also academic inclusion becomes easier as children of the same age communicate their ideas easily and understand each other with greater ease.

- **Accessible environments:** The physical conditions and psychological climate of the institution deny or accept the student with a special need. In Indian conditions, the infrastructural barriers shall not be removed easily as it may involve a lot of money.

- **TLM /Teaching aids:** Innumerable equipmentis found every day all through the world to help these children come out of their difficulties. Such supportive devices and equipment should be used widely to help these children. Other modern multimedia devices also can be introduced in the process of education.

- **Early diagnosis and intervention:** All gynaecologists, and pediatricians should be trained in the early diagnosis of disabilities. They should also be informed about various educational interventions apart from the services of the paraprofessionals. The educational intervention should start at an earlier stage. There should be a separate institution with comprehensive support of all professionals –clinician, paramedical and educational to ensure bringing out the fullest potential of the student.

- **Parent's involvement:** The parents need proper guidance. They miss or ignore the very important early days of the child's development in doctor shopping. The doctors shall have a multi-disciplinary approach tothe upbringingof the children; there shall be special counsellors to guide these parents for holistic and total rehabilitation. All the information should be provided under one roof.

- **Supported teachers and schools:**The society and the local community shall support inclusive Education. The practical problems in educating the child with a special need viz transportation, community living and economic crisis shall be well supported by thecommunity in a united effort. Each one taking up some small part of the responsibility shall lessen the burden on the parents, teachers and schools. After all the child is a part of the community and shall take responsibility for upbringing the child.

- **Class size:** The smaller the size of the class, the greater the scope for inclusion. The government shall not decrease the teacher-pupil ratio at this moment, but the head teacher and other teachers shall think of reducing the size of the class of the particular section (sectionA, sectionB etc). Skills/strategies to deliver curriculum-differentiated instruction, student student-centredlessonsbecome achievable through this.

- **Ongoing training to school and community:** The authorities shall take up restoring the facilities and also increasing them. The optimistic spirit needs regular encouragement for a happy and healthy restoration of motivation. People-friendly awareness campaigns and awards shall encourage inclusion.

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1176

- **Success of inclusive classrooms:**Well-designed individualized education programs, professional development for all teachers involved, general and special educators alike, Time for teachers to plan, meet, create, and evaluate the students together, reduced class size based on the severity of the student needs, Professional skill development in the areas of cooperative learning, peer tutoring, adaptive curriculum, collaboration between parents or guardians, teachers, specialists, administration, and outside agencies, sufficient funding so that schools will be able to develop programs for students based on student need instead of the availability of funding.

Conclusion:

Above all the barriers mentioned, the crucial point to be noted is that inclusive education cannot be in any way equated with only enrollment and with the mere construction of a ramp. Enrolling a disabled child into school is only the beginning of the process. The school community needs to be prepared for the education of the child and all stakeholders must have undergone capacity building. Focus needs to be put on the education of severely disabled children who often get left out of the system. Only through a sustainable and foolproof system can we ensure that the 24 million accounted for and more unaccounted numbers of invisible disabled children are allowed to go to school and dream of a better future without discrimination and neglect.

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1178