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Promoting Inclusion at the Elementary Level of Education

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Abstract

Inclusivity in education ensures that each child can participate fully and develop in a shared learning environment. This type of education provides every child a fair opportunity to develop and succeed in school. Hence, fostering diversity in education can be viewed as a method that unites learners with different requirements in a common learning space. It advocates for a schooling system that caters to all individuals, irrespective of their distinct characteristics. This review paper attempts to identify the target groups of inclusion at the Elementary level of education, to find out the developments in the area of inclusive learning and also suggest measures for improving the implementation of equitable learning practices at the Elementary level. Information presented in the present paper has been collected from national policies on education, UNICEF reports on inclusive education, the CBSE handbook on inclusive education and the UN World Declaration on Education for All. Some journals and e-content relating to inclusive education have also been referred. Policy perspectives of NEP 2020 with regard to inclusion have also been discussed. Suggestions with regard to inclusion at the elementary level have also been presented in this study.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental right of all children. As per the Constitution of India (this became a fundamental right under Article 21A as per 86th Amendment Act 2002), every child is granted to receive free and compulsory education till the age fourteen. The World Declaration on Education for All, adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (1990), aims to make education universally accessible to all advocating equity (UNESCO, 2009). 'Education for All' means that every child is provided

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with the same chance to access education and develop according to their pace. This calls for inclusion. Inclusion demands that educational needs of every child, youth as well as adults must be addressed. For this, every type of learner must be accommodated in regular schools. Accordingly, 'learning together' is apt.

This article explores inclusive education at the Elementary level, outlining key target groups, recent developments, and recommendations, drawing insights from national and international reports and educational resources.

Methodology

This review paper employs a qualitative and descriptive method to examine inclusive education at the Elementary level. It relies on an extensive analysis of secondary sources, such as national and international policy frameworks, academic publications, research studies, and reliable online content.

Meaning of Inclusion

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it is through inclusive education that a robust education system can be built, enabling the attainment of the objectives of education (UNESCO, 2009). Lisa Friedman states that inclusion values each individual's unique contributions and affirms everyone's rightful place within a community (Friedman, 2020). The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes inclusion as the act or policy of granting equal chances and support to individuals who are typically marginalised (Oxford Learners Dictionary). The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education acknowledges that educational inclusion is a component of broader social inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Inclusivity in education offers all children an equal opportunity to learn and participate. It requires integration of children with the mainstream education system, regardless of their strengths or challenges. Children have different mental abilities and faculties. They face multiple problems in learning areas too. Inclusive education represents a shift in approach, welcoming students of all abilities and backgrounds (Hasan et al., 2018).

The concept of inclusion emphasises removing barriers to learning and promoting active involvement of everyone in the educational process. It treats diversity not as a challenge, but as a strength that enhances education, calling on schools to respond to the varied experiences and abilities of their learners (*Inclusion in Education—A Manual for School Management Committee*, National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2020).

Need for Inclusion

The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all citizens. In line with this statement, it can be understood that integrating children with varying abilities

and challenges into the regular education system would promote educational equity among all students. Chapter III of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 lists specific measures to support inclusive education. To empower individuals with disabilities, it is essential to ensure their complete involvement and integration into the society. Individual differences have to be respected and acknowledged (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education emphasises that for tackling the issues of people's biased attitude towards special children, regular schools should be set up. Orientation programmes should be organised in schools so that awareness can be created. This will facilitate building up such communities of people who can embrace every kind of learner. Thus, regular schools would accommodate everyone despite their differences, leading to enhanced competence and productivity. Every child learns at their own pace and has distinctive learning needs, which should be identified. A child-centric method of education is sure to address the needs of the diverse learners (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994). Every child including the disabled child has the right to live a respectable life leading to a fruitful involvement in the society (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

According to Article III, education systems should be structured so that individuals across age groups can engage with learning suited to their foundational needs. It emphasises the obligation to eliminate exclusion and ensure that students with disabilities are integrated equally into educational provisions (Meeting Basic Learning Needs: A Vision for the 1990s, 1990).

From the above discussions, it is apparent that integrating children into the regular school system requires education that accommodates all learners. One of the primary goals of inclusive education is the removal of societal disparities so that social values can be restored by inclusion in education. The other benefits of inclusive education can be summarised in Figure 1 as given below:

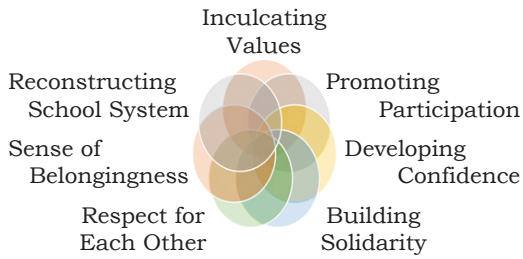


Figure 1: Benefits of Inclusive Education

Target Groups at Elementary Level

Inclusivity in education is a step towards building a congenial education system which leads to participation and learning so that each individual benefits from it. The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

states the need to include every group of learner who has, for ages, been the subject of exclusion—for example, disabled children and minority linguistic groups. Thus, inclusive education attempts to bring everyone into the mainstream and assure their growth and existence by recognising their diverse aspects (UNICEF for every child – inclusive education). The target groups of inclusive education according to the NEP 2020 are those 'Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups that have never been a part of representation in education' (NEP 2020). The various disadvantaged groups as mentioned in NEP 2020 are female and transgender individuals; SCs, STs, OBCs, and minorities; students from remote areas; those with disabilities including learning disabilities; migrant communities, low-income families, marginalised children, orphans, child beggars, and urban poor (NEP 2020). Thus, NEP 2020 aims to bridge the gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes among students from all the aforementioned marginalised backgrounds. Recognising that inclusive practices must begin early, the policy particularly emphasises the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) at the elementary level, as a crucial step towards ensuring equitable learning opportunities from the foundational stages.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 ensures that children aged 6–14, including those with special needs, receive free and mandatory elementary education. Section 3 (2) of the Act emphasises foundational learning for students with disabilities. The National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy reiterates the commitment to ensure equal learning opportunities for the holistic development of children below 6 years of age (National Early Childhood Care Education Policy, 1974). The ECCE is also a part of inclusive education and finds its due place in the policies like NPE 1986, NEP 2020.

Transformations in Education for Inclusion

- *Education and National Development (1964–1966)*: It recommended the establishment of an integrated education system to enhance the cultural and national harmony. This was incorporated in the NPE 1968, which recommended the expansion of educational facilities and progress of such programmes that would accommodate handicapped children in regular schools (National Policy on Education, 1968). The report outlines a focus on the education of girls, marginalised groups, and the enhancement of educational facilities for the children with disabilities.
- *Integrated Education of Disabled Children (1974)*: It makes learning accessible for children with special needs by offering financial support for textbooks, attire, travel, and assistive materials to aid children in being a part of regular classrooms.

- *National Policy on Education (1986)*: It prioritises the removal of disparities to ensure equal access to education for everyone. It recommended integrated school system. It stressed on including children with 'mild' disabilities in regular schools and 'moderate to severe' disabilities in segregated schools (National Policy on Education, 1986).
- *Programme of Action (POA) (1992)*: It approximated that nearly 12.59 million children with disabilities should receive education within schools. POA recognised children with disabilities in the categories of mobility impairments, hearing impairments, speech impairments, visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, and learning difficulties, within the age range of 5–14 years. The document highlights that children with disabilities are to benefit from early intervention and care under the ECCE framework.
- *The Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act (1995)*: It ensures that individuals with disabilities are not left behind, allowing them to actively engage in building the nation (PWD Act 1995). It proposes that all children with disabilities be granted free education until the age of 18, either through integrated or special schooling systems. Vocational education will also be made available in special schools (PWD Act 1995).
- *Chapter II of Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009)*: It states that all children from 6–14 years of age are entitled to free and compulsory education till they complete elementary education. It also includes the option of providing education at home for children with profound disabilities.
- *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (2000–01)*: Its aim is to ensure that every child aged 6–14 receives elementary education. The primary aims of this scheme include prioritising the education of girls and learners with disabilities (SSA, Manual for District-Level Functionaries Level 2017).
- *Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 Act*: Under this act, the recognised impairments have been increased from 7 to 21. It advocates that general classroom educators and special educators must be provided with a broader range of expertise and competencies to address the various learning needs of students.
- *National Education Policy (2020)*: A special mention about 'disabilities' finds a place in NEP 2020. It recognises the value of building mechanisms that enable Children with Special Needs (CWSN) or Divyang to access quality education at par with their peers. It suggests that approaches like one-on-one instruction, support from peers, alternative schooling models, appropriate

facilities, and specialised technology can significantly aid certain children with disabilities (NEP, 2020). It emphasises and guarantees the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational institutions, starting from the early childhood to the higher studies. It endorses the RPWD Act of 2016. Strategies like recruitment of special educators, establishment of resource centres, provision of appropriate devices and teaching–learning materials will be adopted. Children with severe disabilities can opt for regular or special schools. For children facing critical disabilities, home-based education will be made available as an alternative. 'Inclusion fund' finds a place in the policy perspectives.

Discussion

The target groups of inclusive education consider the inclusion of various groups of children from underrepresented groups, who have been identified as socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The education of transgenders and girls finds a special place of inclusion in NEP 2020. 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' will be allocated for supporting girls and transgender education. Free boarding facilities will be provided for students who come from far-flung areas and come under the 'socio-economically disadvantaged groups'. In order to strengthen inclusive education, scholarships and schemes will be made available to the students from the Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) through 'single-window' system'. By implementing such measures, commitment to inclusive education is evident, ensuring that every child, no matter their background, is given equal chances and a sense of social belonging.

Suggestions for Improvement of Inclusion in Education

A dynamic educational system that addresses the varied needs of students is crucial for enhancing inclusion in education. This requires the development of a robust support system to maximise inclusivity. Schools must be restructured along inclusive lines, with enhanced infrastructural facilities to accommodate differently abled children within regular schools. Appointment of special educators in all educational institutions is crucial to support these learners effectively. Furthermore, classroom seating arrangements should be thoughtfully designed to facilitate the engagement of children with diverse needs. Establishing 'Student Support Services' in every school is imperative for addressing the emotional and academic needs of students. Additionally, training teachers for inclusivity is a priority. The teacher training curriculum must be revised to incorporate the necessary changes that foster inclusive education. Schools should also organise awareness programmes to promote

understanding of children's rights, with education being a fundamental one. Integrating technology into learning processes is another critical step in advancing inclusion. Technology-based learning tools can offer personalised educational experiences for students with special needs. Qualified counsellors and social workers should actively collaborate with stakeholders in the field of education to enhance students' participation in schools. Collectively, these strategies can create a supportive learning environment.

Conclusion

Inclusive education aims to educate all children without any kind of discrimination or barriers, enabling regular schools to become inclusive in nature. It addresses varied needs of children and enables them to learn together under one roof. Different acts and policies have framed the guidelines for inclusive education. Yet, the aims of inclusive education are still not achieved. A shift in perspective towards inclusive learning is urgently required. There is a need to raise awareness about creating an inclusive environment in regular schools. All stakeholders of education need to work together to accomplish the objectives of inclusive education. A governing body comprising parents and the faculty of the institutions has to be constituted for a better implementation of the inclusive learning environment. This provides a fair chance for every kind of learner to learn together, fulfilling the target of 'Education for All'.

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