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The Experience of Inclusive Education in Hyderabad

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Abstract:

It is almost two decades since the Peoples with Disabilities Act (1995) was passed. So, the present article will underline the problems faced by the students with disabilities attending mainstream schools. In order to understand the concept of inclusive education, the author spoke to several individuals having Visual Impairment (V.I) and Physical Impairment (P.I) who had access to mainstream schools. At first, the study will attempt to assess the level of awareness of the school managements regarding the various legislative and policy provisions for children with disabilities. Based on the convenience of the majority, society has defined what is normal and what is abnormal. The authorities in the government and private schools interviewed agree that society should adapt to children with disabilities, rather than them adapting to society. It emerged from the study that a majority of the disabled respondents have been rejected at least twice from the mainstream schools they had approached. Majority of the respondents felt that the school infrastructure needs to be improved. Most of the students with disabilities acknowledged that more than the teachers, it was their friends who had given them special attention as and when required.

1. Introduction

Any nation can be called developing or developed only when it can ensure inclusive growth. For inclusive development, education plays a vital role in shaping the worldview of children, by creating a society that is inclusive and without barriers. Therefore, schools are considered as important agencies for developing a tolerant and plural society by means of imparting education and providing equal opportunities for all (irrespective of disability). Schools adopting inclusive means are the beacons for establishing an inclusive world in which even those with physical disabilities are assured of a life of dignity inclusive world that is tolerant to the differences.

It is almost two decades since the Peoples with Disabilities Act (1995) was passed. Similarly, it is almost five years since the Right to Education Act 2010 was passed by the government of India. Yet as seen from the study, many schools have not adhered to the essence of the Act, even when the infrastructure of the school is concerned. Students with disabilities have to be accepted from within the society and this acceptance comes from the nature of inclusion in schools. However, this temperament is lamentably lacking in most of the schools in Hyderabad.

So, the present article will underline the problems faced by the students with disabilities attending mainstream schools. It shows how inclusive schools in Hyderabad actually are. This study will seek to find out the gap between the policy and the existing situation.

2. The Methodology

In order to understand the concept of inclusive education, the author had reviewed literature from sources like books, reports and websites. In order to cover the various aspects of inclusive education to make this paper as detailed as possible, the author sought appointment from 40 schools, but got permission from only 10 schools, which includes 6 government schools and 4 private schools. Based on the interviews with the Principal and headmaster (where the Principal was not available), the article aims to find the real picture of the society which claims to be "inclusive".

In order to have a better understanding of the true nature of inclusion in the schools of Hyderabad, the author spoke to several individuals having Visual Impairment (V.I) and Physical Impairment (P.I) who had access to mainstream schools. In the course of survey, this study the author came across certain findings that expose the glaring loop-holes that exist in the education system. Interestingly, many of the concerns articulated by the respondents were common to all. However the study had some limitations. Firstly, establishing contacts with students with disabilities attending mainstream school was the greatest challenge, as most students still attend special schools. Secondly, in spite of repeated attempts to organise a focus group discussion the author was

unable to gather parents of students with disabilities attending regular schools on the same day and time. The names of the interviewees have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

3. Disability, Inclusive Education and the Law

Inclusion is not just a set of actions to be pursued by the State, but, most importantly, it is an idea, a vision, a policy and a value-framework. To include implies a process whereby fragments become a part of the whole. On the other hand, to exclude means a set of practices that deny, that restrict and that keep out. The idea of inclusion also suggests that being different from the rest does not pose a barrier to one's being a part of the larger whole. In other words, pursuing inclusion also means an equal commitment to diversity. It goes without saying then, that for the Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) – who are physically or intellectually different from the others – a just world is one, which is inclusive; socially, politically, culturally, economically. In this section, the author will try to explore whether such a vision of inclusion is reflected in the legal framework and whether a strong case for inclusive education can be made, by relying on the law.

3.1. Constitution of India

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees right to equality; which is the cornerstone of inclusion. Segregation in education on the basis of ability is a violation of the right to equality of Persons With Disability.

Article 21A of the Constitution guarantees access to education as a fundamental right.

The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, makes it mandatory for the Government to provide free and compulsory education to “all children of the age of 6-14 years”. The Preamble of the Act clarifies that “all” also includes children with disabilities.

3.2. Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995

Three phrases occur within brackets in the title of the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. These are: equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation. The objective of providing equal opportunities is to provide a level playing field to person with disabilities so that they can share the benefits of development along with the other non-disabled citizens. Similarly, the rights of the Persons with Disabilities can be protected only when the State and the society are receptive to the ‘differentness’ of the rights-holder. And, the pre-requisite for advancing an agenda for participation, full or otherwise, of any group of marginalised citizens is an inclusive social structure. Thus, it can be argued that the idea of inclusion is a part of the broad vision that the PWD Act seeks to promote. The provisions in the PWD Act, 1995, relating to education of the Persons with Disabilities can be organised and understood under the following four heads:

3.2.1. Access to Education

The government and the local authorities are to ensure that every disabled child and youth has access to free education in an “appropriate environment” till the age of 18; the government shall attempt to integrate the disabled students in “mainstream” schools. Special schools shall be set up so that disabled children living in any part of the country have easy access to them. Disabled children studying in special schools shall have access to vocational training; books and equipment free of cost. Educational institutes are required to provide amanuensis (scribes) to blind students and those with low vision. Other entitlement include: transport facilities for disabled children; removal of architectural barriers from schools and colleges; grant of scholarships to disabled children; modification in the examination system; and restructuring of the curriculum, to meet their special needs.

3.2.2. Non-Formal Education

The government is to: make schemes for conducting part-time classes for disabled children who could not continue their education; ensure non-formal education in rural areas; open schools and open universities and; use the electronic media to impart education.

3.2.3. Adequate Support Structure

The government needs to: to encourage both official and nongovernmental agencies to develop new assistive devices, teaching aids, special teaching materials, etc, necessary for teaching disabled children; set up teachers' training institutes to develop human resource specializing in teaching disabled children; provide financial assistance to universities, professional bodies for undertaking research for special education, rehabilitation and manpower development.

3.2.4. Equality of Opportunity

Every government and government-aided educational institute is to reserve at least 3% of its seats for persons with disabilities.

3.3. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: (UNCRPD)*

The UNCRPD is an international treaty intended to protect and promote the rights of Persons with Disabilities all over the world. On 2nd October 2007, India became the sixth country to ratify this convention and thereby committed itself internationally to protect the rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 of the UNCRPD mandates the State to:

- Ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.
- Ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability.
- Ensure that Persons with Disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others.
- Ensure that Persons with Disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education.
- Ensure that effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

3.4. *Right to Education Act 2010*

The Right to Education Bill, 2005, which was drafted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, was passed in the Parliament in 2010. Education for children aged between 6 and 14 has finally become a fundamental right. This Act reiterates the government's promise of a Child's right to free Education of the best quality. This Act is considered as the first non-disability bill. It focused policy delineates children with Disabilities as a separate category from other disadvantaged groups. It even specifies some practical modifications, such as modified textbooks and barrier-free school buildings. The model rules, especially for the disabled, under the right of children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2010. Stipulated that:

“The schools will ensure that the disabled children would not be segregated from the other children in the classrooms, nor shall their classes be held at places and timings different from the classes held for the other children. The teacher will provide special attention to a disabled child in the inclusive class, to enable him/her to successfully integrate with the rest of the class, academically and emotionally”.

Both the State Government and Local Authority will ensure that access of children to the school is not hindered on account of social and cultural factors. In case children with disabilities are prevented from accessing the school, the State Government or Local Authority will endeavour to make appropriate and safe transportation arrangements for them to attend school and complete elementary education.

4. **Review of the current status of the schools in Hyderabad**

At first, the study will attempt to assess the level of awareness of the school managements regarding the various legislative and policy provisions for children with disabilities. The 93rd Amendment to the Constitution made it mandatory for the Government to provide free and compulsory education to “all” (which includes children with disability). The state government claims to have allocated funds for the children with disabilities. However, only 11% of the government schools and 5% of the private schools are aware of the existence of such funds.

In 1995, the Government of India passed the Persons with Disabilities Act - more popularly known as the PWD Act. This act ensures that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate environment till he or she attains the age of eighteen years. However, in the study it was found that only 18% of the government schools and 6% of the private schools are aware of the PWD Act.

Similarly, the government of India has made 3% reservation for children with disabilities mandatory. In spite of this provision, it was observed that none of the government and private schools are not aware of the 3% reservations for children with disabilities and they are not implementing this stipulation in the institutions. In practice, the percentage of children with disabilities in government schools is only 0.13%, whereas in private schools, it is only 0.9%.

With regard to the transport facilities to the children with disabilities or in the alternative, financial incentives to parents to enable their children with disabilities to attend schools, the Government has made a mention of the removal of architectural barriers from schools, colleges or other institutions imparting vocational and professional training and setting up of ramps in school buses. All the government and private schools agree in principal that the school buses should have ramps. However, in reality, none of the schools surveyed have ramps.

According to Action Plan for the Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities, formulated by Ministry of Human Resource Development, an MOU has been signed between the National Council for Teachers' Education and the Rehabilitation Council of India towards the convergence so as to ensure disability element in B.ED and M.ED courses and also for in-service teachers. However, it was found that only 6% of the teachers in government schools are trained and oriented in interacting and providing assistance to children with disabilities. The scenario in private schools was even worse with no teachers being specially trained to teach the disabled children.

Based on the convenience of the majority, society has defined what is normal and what is abnormal. To maintain this segregation, society has also perpetuated myths about the persons with disability. For instance, the identity of people with disability gets identified with their disability. Social stigma defines the attitude that people at large have towards people with disability. Schools furnish no exception, right from reservations towards granting admission to children with disability to playing a role in making the school environment a little more inclusive. This section will try to map the attitude that govt. schools and private schools have towards children with disability.

The authorities in the government and private schools interviewed agree that society should adapt to children with disabilities, rather than them adapting to society. The other issues that emerged were:

- 23% government schools and 9% private schools said that children with disabilities should be educated in mainstream schools.
- There was total unanimity that segregation restricts understanding of each other and they also feel that segregation is a violation of human rights.
- There was total agreement that unless equal opportunities are provided to children with disabilities in India, they will remain invisible, responsibilities of NGOs and private institutions.
- 19% government schools and 10% private schools did not think it is mandatory for children with disabilities to be included in regular schools.
- 69% of the government schools and 96% of the private schools were not even aware of the fact that education of the disabled comes under the purview of the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
- The PWD Act makes a special mention of the employment of teachers with disabilities under a special quota. However, it was found that while only 19% of government had employed teachers with disabilities, the private school had no disabled teachers.
- Currently, there is widespread debate about whether or not inclusive education is desirable. In the course of fieldwork, the author found a couple of important points which could be very indicative of the former debate.
- The non disabled children interact with the children with disabilities, 90% government schools and 80% private schools said that.
- 3% government schools and 7% private schools agreed that the non-disabled children tease the children with disabilities.
- None of the government and private schools follows plans with respect to sports, recreation and cultural activities of children with disabilities.
- None of the government and private schools provides special services to disabled children to make their studies or learning easier and they do not even provide counseling services to these children.

5. Experience of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools

5.1. Acceptance from the Mainstream Schools

It emerged from the study that a majority of the disabled respondents have been rejected at least twice from the mainstream schools they had approached. This rejection stems from the fact, or rather the belief, that such students should avail the facilities of a special school. Some of them were granted admission on a trial basis depending upon the adjusting capability of the pupil. The lack of trained teachers in schools became an impediment for them to continue in the schools. This was probably the primary reason for the schools to refuse admission.

In some cases, the physical impaired students had to leave the schools because of the non accessible infrastructure for them in the schools. While, in some other case, the visually impaired students were asked to leave the school by the school management after a few months. The reason being, the teachers were uncertain how to deal with such a student in the higher classes. One visually impaired student sought admission in a reputed mainstream school in Hyderabad. He got admission in the first class and did exceedingly well in his class. But he reveals, "the teachers were unsure as to how to handle me in the higher classes. So the principal asked my parents to remove me from the school". Needless to say, his parents were compelled to take him away and seek admission for him in another school. Now he is in class X and is doing perfectly well in academics and is also actively participating in all other activities of the school.

5.2. The problem of Transport

A large number of the physically impaired students said that the lack of convenient transport facilities made it difficult for them for commuting to school. Though most of the respondents got admission in schools in the vicinity of their homes and commuting to school was not a problem, for those who lived in far flung areas, special transport had to be arranged by the respective

households which were a rather expensive proposition. However, some visually impaired students said that they did not face any problems in transport.

5.3. Infrastructural Problems in Schools

Majority of the respondents felt that the school infrastructure needs to be improved. Students, especially those with physical impairment, felt restricted from accessing certain parts of the school. It was left to the friends to escort them. The lack of lift or ramp evidently constituted a hazardous problem for the students with disabilities. Commuting to school it became a major problem for such students, particularly for those living in far flung areas. The absence of ramps in school buses posed problems in commuting to school. Like in the previous instance most of the visually impaired students stated that they did not face any major infrastructural problems in their schools.

5.4. Attitude of the Peers

Friends constitute an integral part of student life. Peers, in fact, form a mirror image of the society at large. In this regard, the study found a mixed response from disabled students. However, almost all the disabled respondents said that they were fortunate to have good friends throughout school life. Similarly, those respondents who were unhappy with their non-disabled friends at the initial stage also adjusted and became good friends with them.

5.5. Problems Faced During the Examinations

Many of the respondents mentioned that they faced problems during the examinations including public exams. Perhaps, this was one of the most pressing problems for them. To add to the problems, the examination system, by and large, is not supportive to the special needs of the disabled, especially the visually impaired. The major problem is to get a good scribe for the public examinations. This problem was more acute for a blind student who is presently in class X. This individual, though a good student had to face the allegation that the writer was helping him during the examinations.

5.6. Problems in the Curriculum

Nearly most of the students interviewed claimed that they were not allowed to choose the subjects or the stream of their choice after class X. Several respondents in the study were not happy with the pattern of the curriculum. They felt that it should be more oriented towards the needs of the students with disabilities. Under this problem, it is worth mentioning worthy that a student with disability does not have similar access to choices as a normal student. There are noticeable inequalities between them. A number of respondents complained that they were not permitted to pursue the science stream due to their disability. One visually impaired explained that he was not permitted to take accounts as his subjects after class X. A lot of effort had to be put up by the parents to convince the school authorities.

Most of the students with disabilities acknowledged that more than the teachers, it was their friends who had given them special attention as and when required. It was found that only a few teachers gave individual and special attention to disabled students. It was these teachers who played a pivotal role in shaping the mindset of students with disabilities and helped them adjust to the mainstream environment.

6. Select Case Studies

6.1. Response from A Parent Of A Child With Disability:

A parent whose child has visual impairment, felt that till class V, special schools are better attuned to the needs of the students with visual impairment. After class V, these students should avail of the mainstream schools. As a parent, she opined that communication and socialisation are the two pillars for such children. Hence, interaction with other children in a mainstream school would offer them the opportunity to acquire communicative and social skills.

6.1.1. Experiences with Her Child

The child in question had undergone peer abuse in the various schools he had been admitted to. He had to change several schools in the process as he was unable to cope with the school curriculum or the peer pressure. Moreover, after a brief spell, he was put in a school which fulfilled the needs of such children. Some of the schools that had admitted them did not however issue notices about the admission to children with disabilities. This parent had a trying experience with a number of schools due to their unfeeling attitude. According to her, more considerate approach in dealing with such children is required. Hence, she has formed a non-government organization associated with children with disabilities and is organizing recreational activities like sports and social activities for them.

6.2. Case Study of Krishna: Nature of Disability: Physical impairment

6.2.1. Education

Even though Krishna's parents, were willing to pay school fee, most of the private schools were not willing to admit him. So, his parents had to choose a suitable school which would accommodate the needs of the disabled. In this process, they approached more than 10 schools in the city. Finally, after lot of hesitation, Krishnas parents admitted him to a government school which was close to his residence. Since most private schools were reluctant to admit disabled children by private schools.

6.2.2. Infrastructure of the School

Even now, this school is not disabled-friendly. Though Krishna found difficulty in accessibility, he had to adjust because of the education. Mainly his friends would help him in the school. Since Krishna lived close by, he took an auto-rickshaw to school. Usually he went alone.

6.2.3. Teaching Methodology

Some teachers saw Krishna at par with the other students. They were a motivating factor and this that sustained him throughout his school life. As he moved through the different stages of school, the attitude and behaviour of his teachers remained constant towards him and he got special attention on certain occasions, especially regarding his illegible his hand-writing. For this, his teachers allotted him extra time during the examinations. Though he coped well with the curriculum, he feels the necessity for a change. Krishna took tuitions for mathematics. His favourite subjects were computers and physics. However, his teachers asked him to shift his subjects in higher classes because they felt he could not be comfortable in the laboratory. This compelled him to switch to other options like social science.

6.2.4. Social Interaction and Attitudinal Issues

Krishna is a very sociable individual and enjoys the company of his friends and others. His friends gave him lot of "support" and helped him with the school work. He has expanded his circle of friends in the entire school. Krishna proudly said that he hardly had any unpleasant memory of his school and thus felt no need to change school after Class X. Most importantly, he would recommend this school to any pupil like him. He likes computer programming and has learnt animation. The school played a vital role in nurturing his talents; thereby increasing his social interactions. He had participated in numerous activities in his school and won prizes. Krishna's family, teachers and friends have been his pillars of support. He feels that students like him should be integrated in a mainstream school.

6.3. The Case Study of Nagaraju: Nature Of Disability: Blind by Birth

6.3.1. Education

Nagaraju's parents did not find much difficulty in locating a suitable school for him. One of the popular private schools in the city gave free admission to Nagaraju. Nagaraju said he was aware of the PWD Act through television programmes and debates since the year 2000 and holds the Government responsible for the schools' lack of awareness regarding the Act.

6.3.2. Infrastructure

Mobility in school was not at all a problem for Nagaraju and he is ever grateful to the school authorities for their cooperation. He was allowed to be assisted to and back from class by his escort. Even his classmates helped him around. Commuting to school was not tough. When asked about computer education, he mentioned that it was provided in his school, but never opted for the subject. But currently, he is well into computers, using the software Job Access with speech, which reads out the web page to him.

6.3.3. Teaching Methodology

Nagaraju got individual attention from the teachers when needed and some of them volunteered to help on their own. They made him sit in the first bench. While teachers dictated answers, he would record these by using a MP3 player. He used Braille rarely. Nagaraju never considered examinations as an evil or an unnecessary burden. The school arranged the best student to write his all examinations and he was given half an hour of extra time. Mathematics has always been a problem for Nagaraju. It was rather difficult for him to dictate a sum to the writer.

He says that even the teachers in the school never teach Mathematics for blind students because they feel that they are providing best students for writing examinations for the blind students. So, these students can make these blind students to pass in this subject. Hence, mathematics is considered as a difficult subject for all the blind students. Nagaraju was mostly for singing and friends. He said it was his dream at one point in time to become a singer. Academics never interested him until he perceived it as a matter of choice and not compulsion. He was always in favour of humanities-with political science being his passion.

6.3.4. Social Interaction and Attitudinal Aspects

Nagaraju had good communication skills with friends and classmates. Nagaraju school life has been very memorable for him, but the hallmark of it was when he was referred to as the most self-sufficient boy who could not only take care of himself but could show others the way too. Nagaraju holds a firm belief that society cannot expect persons with disability to be at par with the others; hence reservation is very important if equality is to be achieved. Nagaraju said that all students with disability should be a part of the mainstream school. Special schools only segregate.

7. Conclusion

In spite of several legislations and steps taken by the government of India regarding the promotion and implementation of inclusive education, still there is denied of admission to disabled children in the mainstream schools. Even the schools that are promoting inclusive education, are doing it in a patronising manner. These school managements are not able to understand that education of children with disabilities is not a charity issue, one about but rights. It is also clear that even now students with disabilities are not allowed to take up the stream of their choice. It means that these individuals are lacking wider choice in education or selecting subjects they like. Therefore, the only choice for them is to join in the special schools and opt for Arts subjects. This in a way is discouraging the talent, ability and capability of disabled students.

Hence, if inclusion is to move beyond words, the students with disability must have access to opportunities and share the same spaces like their non-disabled friends and share the common resources of the school. Schools have to change their outlook from being mere institutions that give guidance to inculcating a broader change in the social environment to foster a just society. This can be possible only if all individuals, irrespective of caste, creed, sex feels that it is their important duty to promote inclusive education. Then only the goal of providing inclusive education for the Disabled can be fulfilled.

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