

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION; A PROCESS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

By:

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – A PROCESS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (1990) set the goal of Education for All. However, despite encouraging developments there are still an estimated 113 million primary school age children not attending school (International Consultative Forum on Education for All, 2000). 90% of them live in low and lower middle income countries. Of those who do enrol in primary school, large numbers drop out before completing their primary education. One particularly vulnerable group is children with disabilities

It is recognised that current strategies and programmes have largely been insufficient or inappropriate with regard to needs of children and youth who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. Where programmes targeting various such groups do exist, they have functioned outside the mainstream – special programmes, specialized institutions, and specialist educators. Despite the best intentions, too often the result has been exclusion. In some cases ‘second-rate’ educational opportunities that do not guarantee the possibility to continue studies. In others, children with various needs have been left outside mainstream school life and may be in danger of being placed outside mainstream social and cultural life (UNESCO, 1999).

Inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. The

principle of inclusive education was first adopted at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994):

Inclusive education means that

“... schools should accommodate **all children** regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups.” (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, para 3)

At the core of inclusive education is the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1949. Equally important is the right of children not to be discriminated against, stated in Article 2 of the Convention on the Right of the Child (UN, 1989). A logical consequence of this right is that all children have the right to receive the kind of education that does not discriminate on grounds of disability, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, capabilities, and so on.

While there are also very important human, economic, social and political reasons for pursuing a policy and approach of inclusive education, it is also a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) asserts that:

“Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.” (Salamanca Statement, Art. 2)

The Dakar World Education Forum in April 2000 reviewed the efforts in the decade following the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All., but also set targets for the future. The specific goals set in Dakar to ensure “that by 2015 all children have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality” can not be reached without a focus on children who may be excluded from or marginalized within education systems because of their apparent difficulties. These may include:

- Those who are enrolled in education but are excluded from learning.
- Those who are not enrolled in schools but who could participate if schools were more flexible in their responses and welcoming in their approach;
- The relatively small group of children with more severe impairments who may have a need for some form of additional support.

To address the need of these learners:

“...Education systems must be inclusive, actively seeking out children who are not enrolled, and responding flexibly to the circumstances and needs of all learners...”

(Expanded commentary on the Dakar Framework for Action, para 19)

When looking to reach the students who do not participate fully, it is important to give attention to the forms of education provided for all children, including a consideration of which children are given the opportunity to participate in school and which children are excluded and on what basis. (Save the Children 2001)

Care has to be taken when looking into which children come to be categorized as being in some way “special”, “marginalized” or “excluded” within particular contexts. In many communities all children are sent to the local school and taught by the local teacher- including children with disabilities. The community and the school take responsibility for all children. Bringing special needs thinking, where one group of children is identified as different, into such a context might diminish this sense of responsibility (UNESCO 2001).

It is also important to remember that a child categorized in one context as “special” might not be so in another and that children categorized within one “group” might have more different than similar needs; for instance two blind children in the same school might have very different needs, one might face considerable difficulties in learning academic subjects while the other one is a fast learner.

Experiences in different countries show that it is not sufficient to look at how to integrate one particular group of children such as children with disabilities.



In some schools one can see that children categorized as having special needs might be in the same classroom, but have separate tasks to do or even a separate teacher. Communication and interaction with the other pupils then become difficult, and eventually the child is excluded within the class. (Many of you have may have visited “inclusive schools” where children with “special needs” are asked to raise their hand when you come in as a visitor.)

Integrating one group of students may not address other grounds for discrimination in classrooms. For instance. In Romania I joined a UNICEF to visit a school where the majority of the children in the classroom were of Roma background, an ethnic minority in Romania which is marginalized in many countries in Europe. In one of the classrooms they had successfully integrated children with disabilities. While we were there, one of the children got up and read a letter where he asked the major of the city to “get rid of the trash, the loose dogs and the Roma people” in his neighbourhood. The letter was commended by the teacher as very nice and she did not consider it problematic. So though children with disabilities were successfully integrated, the school needed to have a stronger emphasis on discrimination in the classrooms in general in their next stage of

school improvement. They therefore need to focus more on the needs of individual children, rather than focusing on the group.

When moving towards more inclusive policies and practice, the focus needs to be on strategies to remove barriers to learning and participation for all children.

It is necessary to look into how schools can be modified or changed to make sure that the education is relevant to the local context, includes and treats all pupils with respect and is flexible so that all can participate. This has implications for policy development, curriculum development, teacher training, local capacity building and community involvement and requires re-directing resources and inter-sectorial cooperation (UNESCO 2001). For instance:

Policy development

In some countries policies exist that open up a possibility for authorities not to take responsibility for certain groups of children. Often this applies to children with severe intellectual disability, but it might also refer, for instance, to ethnic minorities or children without a birth certificate. Also in a great number of countries, the education of some specific groups of learners such as children might be the responsibility of another authority than the Ministry of Education. Often this allows for a situation where these learners are not expected or encouraged to participate in mainstream education. The Education for All planning process can be an important opportunity for countries to look closer at the organisation of education and review their policies to ensure that they do not

create barriers for certain groups of children. It is also important to remember that all children have equal rights, does not necessarily mean they should have equal treatment. Indirect discrimination is prevalent. It may be that countries have legislation establishing the right to education for all children- including children with disabilities. However, children with disabilities may still not be able to go to school because nothing has been done to make schools accessible. (UNESCO 2001)

Funding, as part of a policy framework for inclusion, is an important means in supporting the move towards inclusion. Countries committed to achieve Education for All may state that “special equipment” and other “extra” support needed is too costly. However, it should be evident that Education for All cannot be achieved unless ALL children are included as equals and not considered as “extra. A move towards a more inclusive school system can be seen as a strategy towards improving the quality of the education system as a whole. Some countries, such as Lao PDR, have stated that the inclusion of a certain group of children, in their case children with disabilities, has been an opportunity to review the policies and practice and has resulted in improved education for all children. (UNESCO 2001)

Curriculum Development

Within the education system the curriculum may be one of the major obstacles for inclusion. In many countries the curriculum is extensive and demanding, and centrally designed and rigid. The curriculum can facilitate the development of more inclusive settings if it leaves for the school or teacher to make adaptations so that it makes sense in

the local context and for the individual learner. Linked to the issue of curriculum is the issue of language of instruction; in many countries it may be different than the language that students use at home making it difficult for some of them to follow what is happening in the classroom. Bilingual education, at least during the early grades, can help to address this problem. (UNESCO 2001)

Teacher Training

Often much of the teaching in the classroom is based on rote learning, meticulous following of textbooks and copying. Team teaching, active problem solving and a stronger involvement of students in the teaching—learning process can be central in engaging the student. However, in order to change the practices in the classroom into more child-friendly and flexible practices, teachers and schools need training building on the existing expertise. There also needs to be a school environment that encourages risk-taking so teachers have the time and dare try out new approaches, and for example do not have to worry about inspectors or head teachers not liking what they are doing. A whole school approach to school improvement has proven more effective in establishing change in schools, than concentrating on training a few of the staff.

Local capacity building and community involvement

The first task in building effective support for schools is to mobilize the resources that already exist in schools and the local community; in addition there might be need for some external support such as teams of teacher trainers or support teachers coming in on a regular basis. For instance, in some countries, the roles of the inspectors have changed from “grading” schools and teachers to giving pedagogical support on a regular basis. Often the support can come from the local community such as these elderly women helping out in a local kindergarten in India. It may also come in the form of special schools giving support to regular schools in their areas of expertise or centers providing support to clusters of schools.

UNESCO recognises that separate projects and programmes for marginalized and excluded groups do not have a big impact. Instead, UNESCO promotes inclusive approaches throughout its activities. Rather than concentratig on rising the quality of education in one part of education or for one group of students, we try concentrate on how we can work together to raise the quality of education for all students. The focus of the work has been on;



- developing approaches, policies and strategies to address diverse needs in education

- supporting national capacity building for government policy-making and system management
- gathering and disseminating information and ideas

It is important to identify and highlight instructive practices or best practices in this region that are showing a real change in schools towards inclusion; where schools and teachers feel supported in the process and parents feel they are involved. Too many examples exist where children with disabilities or other vulnerable groups are given access, but are not given the opportunity to truly participate.

The idea of inclusive education challenges much of existing thinking in the special needs field, whilst, at the same time, offering a critique of the practices of general education. Put simply, many of those who are supporting the idea are raising the question, why is it that schools throughout the world fail to teach so many pupils successfully? The ultimate goal of inclusive education is a school where all are participating and treated as equally important. However, as we move towards inclusion it is important to remember that there probably does not exist any one school that can claim to be totally inclusive. **Inclusive education is a constant process of school improvement to ensure that Education for All really is for all.** (UNESCO 2001)

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