



Barriers to Inclusion in Education

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A month into school and Mrs. G., the UKG class teacher, was worried, “S doesn’t understand anything I say, and I don’t know how to teach her. She copies from other students around her. During play time, she stands and watches the others without joining in.” The student in question, had been admitted into the school under the RtE Act, did not understand English, (the medium of instruction of most private schools - in this article I have used the words ‘private schools’ to refer to schools where the RtE Act is enforced) and her teacher was at a loss how to address the situation! This and similar concerns, frustrate those in the school system when trying to cope with the situation that they are faced with, since the RtE Act was enforced in 2008. Teachers, who want to succeed, depend on their own creativity and intuitive sense to work with a group of children who, in spite of wearing the same uniform, appear different. Are they different? What is the difference? Do we try to make them ‘fit in’, or allow them to be different?

To grow and learn, a child requires an environment where her social and emotional needs are met. To create such a supportive environment it is imperative that each member of the community that is involved in the process of inclusion is considered of equal influence. There are no givers or takers in this equation, this is not a charitable act, rather one that benefits all involved. The very mission statement of inclusion is missed when one participant/stakeholder is considered better/greater than the others.

The school setting is a critical environment for the child who is considered for inclusion, and the persons who influence and affect the inclusion process the most are - the child, the parents (the child’s parents and parents of the other students),

the school administration, the school support staff and teachers. It is this community that needs to understand and concur with the philosophy of inclusion and the reasons for its implementation, in order for inclusion to take place as smoothly and effectively as possible.

UNESCO (2008) has listed barriers to inclusion as attitudinal factors, physical barriers, curriculum, teacher attitudes and abilities, language and communication, socio-economic factors, funding, organization of the educational system and policies. While each of the above is of importance, I will restrict myself, in this article to attitudinal factors – that of the school’s as well as of the parents’, language and communication, and socio-economic factors. How do they present as barriers, in the context of implementation of the RTE Act in India?

Teacher attitudes towards the process of inclusion and the child who is the target of inclusion, impact on the success of inclusive education. Teacher resistance could present as a result of different reasons. For one, mainstream teachers feel that they don’t have the skills to teach students who present with academic challenges as the lesson is not designed for differentiated teaching. This is further complicated by their sense of guilt that giving individual attention to one child, or a small group of children, will take away teaching time from other students. Another likely reason for teacher resistance to inclusion is their incorrect understanding of inclusion and their ‘philosophy’ towards inclusion; some teachers view inclusion as ‘getting the child to be like everyone else’, while others might see inclusion as offering an environment where different needs be met.

When the teaching and the instructional material is in English, as is the case in most private schools in

India, a child with no previous knowledge of English will have difficulty in following the lesson and accessing the curriculum. Often, for these children, their only exposure to English will be the teachers and their peers at school. The child is not immersed in the language the way her middle class peers are – by way of story books, hearing others (parents, friends) converse in English, watching television or films in English, or even to see English print as in a newspaper, and this deprives the child of a range of vocabulary. If appropriate accommodations are not provided for the child, there will be an increasing gap between the teaching and the learning that takes place. As a result the child will be expected to ‘catch up’ (through extra lessons or tuitions), leaving the teacher feeling inadequate and frustrated and the child a disconnect with the main person in her 7 hour school day.

In addition, in my experience, children who are not proficient in the language of instruction and do not participate in class are discriminated against, by their peers, as well. Young children play out stories that they have read or watched on television and anyone amongst them who does not understand the setting of the ‘language’ or the story, is alienated. A 10 year old (from a socially and economically disadvantaged background) with behavior problems, whom I was working with, was in an inclusive programme with middle class children. She found it hard to make friends and when asked what the main difference was, said ‘English – they talk differently’.

While it is clear that children who do not have a prior knowledge of the English language will require support in learning the language, the question that is most difficult to answer is – when do we give these children the extra support they need. It would be convenient for the education system to use the so called ‘non-academic lessons’ (like sport or art), or during their lunch break for support classes. However, as the social integration of children with their peers occurs most often during non-academic settings and, as it is perhaps during such times that these children find the playing field a little more equal, should we, knowing the ramifications, take this time (and interaction) away from them?

The kind of pencil box, the child’s hairstyle, the kind of shoes they wear, the kind of food that is brought from home as snack or lunch are all indicators of a child’s cultural and socio-economic background and become reasons for discrimination in a classroom of children. Children observe these differences and unless these are accepted and understood as ‘normal differences’, they become material for discrimination and bullying.

The familiarity (or not), with the usage of the different facilities provided in a school, are barriers that are not easily identifiable. A young child who does not use a commode in the toilet at home will not be familiar with its use in school, resulting in spills or stains that become evident to his or her peers. This can result in bullying in the form of name calling, being ridiculed or being labeled by peers, and subsequent social isolation; in addition to condescending attitudes or expressions of distaste among adults. Isolation of children among peers leads to social difficulties and affects their self-esteem as well. Identifying such obstacles to inclusion becomes the responsibility of sensitive school personnel.

The class and caste bias in Indian society against groups that are less advantaged (by birth or socio-economic status), lead to attitudes that discriminate and label. It is widely assumed by parents of middle class children that children from underprivileged homes are different: will help themselves to things that do not belong to them, that they are not exposed to instruction in their homes about basic values of right and wrong, that they carry disease and do not understand the basics of hygiene. Parents (thankfully, not all) who send their children to private schools, react with anticipated dismay at the thought of their (clean, healthy and ‘ethically perfect’ and ‘well mannered’ – no lies, no stealing, no foul language, no aggression) children interacting for 7 hours every day with those who do not have these advantages. This translates to instilling in their own child an attitudinal bias against children who come in through the RtE Act. This kind of bias also exists among our teachers who are, after all, part of the same culture.

Open and ongoing communication must be accessible to all who are involved in inclusion. Heads of schools who are not sensitive to parents who are not fully literate or to those parents who do not read or write in English, will not provide accommodations or give these parents the confidence that they are part of the inclusion process. Parents who are not familiar with English are made to feel different when kept out of whole school programmes (like an Annual Day), which further add to their and their child's feeling of alienation. One teacher had the idea to designate a parent (not part of the RtE admissions), fluent in the local language, to ensure that all communications were shared with those not fluent in English. Simple measures like this could help bridge the gap.

Some parents of children who enter schools through the RtE Act have expressed their apprehension of whether their child would be made to feel different. Parents need to know and understand the accommodations that are provided for their child; when and how their child's needs are addressed; in addition they need to understand the importance of their contribution to their child's

education – not only in providing the child with a physical space to study and do their homework, but also with their active participation in the school processes and activities. They are often just grateful that their child is getting an education that would otherwise not have been possible. This sense of gratitude along with a reluctance to assert, as parents, in the education of their child does not empower them to be equal partners in this process. Parents have a right to be involved socially, intellectually, culturally and personally in the system.

Real inclusion is what we want to aim for, but will we be able to overcome the hurdles and barriers that come in the way to achieve this? Will we be able to change attitudinal biases, be sensitive to differences of every kind, and celebrate them instead of judging them? Will we be able to facilitate the process of inclusion and get these vulnerable children through a basic school education without damaging their sense of self?

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