



Centralising Equity, Celebrating Diversity: Practising Inclusion in Our Educational System

Vandana Mahajan

Power of inclusive education for girls:

“Par laga liye hai humne Pinjron mein kaun bathega zara sun lo”

(We have got wings, who will sit in the cage, let the whole world hear this)ⁱ

-“Meri icha haiki main apne matapita ki yogya beti kahlyoon” (I wish to be recognised as an able daughter of my mother and father)

-“Mein apne illake ki pehli graduate hoon” (I’m the first graduate from my blockⁱⁱ)

-“Apna naam kamaoon, par kuch galat naa kar jaoon, iss se dar jati hoon. Umeed yahi rakhti hoon ki aab mauka mila hai to kuch karke dikhaongi” (I want to earn a good name, but I’m scared of doing something which will be labeled wrong. I hope that given this opportunity I will be able to prove myself.)

-“Darpok aur bheegi billi ki pechaan ko chodkar, pardon se bahar niklne ka safar hai mera”. (I have decided to abandon the societal perception of being weak and afraid. My journey has been that of coming out of the veil of invisibility)

-“Maine swaal uthaana tai kiya hai” (I have decided to question the social norms); Besharam banna tai kiya hai maine” (I have chosen to be shameless)

These are voices of some of the young women from Jharkhand, U.P and Bihar whom I had met as part of my recent interactions as a national resource group member of a national women and girls empowerment programme titled ‘Education for Women’s Equality’ (popularly called the Mahila

Samakhya programme). These opinions and aspirations articulating a strong and vibrant sense of agency is coming from the experience of these girls who got one more chance to enjoy the maza (fun) of schooling and learning once again after being pushed out of the schools early on in their lives. Thousands of such girls got an opportunity to re-join the mainstream elementary education after going through an educational bridge course programme called Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK) which are organised under the Mahila Samakhya programme.ⁱⁱⁱ

Was it not for programmes like Mahila Samakhya these girls from very poor and marginalised sections of the society would have their ambitions and aspirations unfulfilled or choked by the repressive and exclusionary socio-cultural norms. The principles of equity and inclusion practiced in MSKs go a long way in developing a sense of self assurance, strong self identity and wellbeing in girls.

Caste based discrimination in education:

Education is believed to have a catalytic influence in fostering more equitable social relations, yet schools and classrooms are not totally free from manifest or hidden prejudices and inequities. The Right to Education Act has made education accessible to the lowest denominator in the society but has failed to check discrimination and humiliation of children from the marginalised sections by teachers and other members of the educational community. These are among the key findings of a report by the Human Rights Watch

ⁱ An excerpt from a popularly sung women’s empowerment song from the song book produced by Jagori - a Delhi-based feminist resource organisation.

ⁱⁱ From Saraikela district of Jharkhand

ⁱⁱⁱ Mahila Samkhya is a national programme under the aegis of the department of education, Ministry of human resource development of Government of India. It is currently running in 9 states of India.

Group which was released in April 2014. The report titled, 'They say We're Dirty: Denying an Education to India's Marginalised' documents discrimination by school authorities in four states – Delhi, U.P, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh – against Dalits, Tribal and Muslim children. From cleaning toilets to being made to sit separately in the class, the report has documented persistent discrimination of children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in schools. It states that the discrimination creates an unwelcome atmosphere that can lead to truancy and eventually may lead the child to stop going to school.

To address such deep seated social exclusion, in Bihar, a community project under Utthan programme had introduced focused interventions for Maha Dalit (Musahar) community and ensuring participation of the most marginalised social group in elementary education. Another programme, 'Hunar', in the same state, provides vocational education opportunities to Muslim girls. These programmes are considered good examples of inclusive education practice.

Dysfunctional relationship between mainstream languages, indigenous and child's first language:

Another exclusionary practice in our educational system is ignoring the home language of the child and establishing linguistic hegemony of few dominant languages through State-sponsored centralised curriculum and pedagogic approaches. Research shows that bilingualism and multilingualism have benefits for children's academic success, their motivation to achieve, their connection to their family and community and their wellbeing (Wen-Jui and Chien-Chung, 2010; Clarke, 2009). Conversely when children experience a loss or break in their first language they can find it difficult to connect with their cultural heritage and family values without the use of their first language. This can lead to children feeling excluded from family or community groups and experiencing a lack of connection between their first and second (or

additional) language (Yazici, Itler and Glover, 2010).

From a situational analysis exercise of educational services^{iv} for children from four tribal communities of Orissa showed that the elementary schools and Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) centres in the predominant tribal communities didn't have a very diverse profile of children either linguistically or in terms of different tribal denominations. Children were from one dominant tribal community speaking their home language, however, the ECCE teachers were trained to teach in Oriya medium as they were not fluent in speaking and reading in children's home language, nor did they have sufficient teaching learning support to transact the classroom processes in children's home language and be proficient in bridging between the child's language and the state language which is Oriya.

ERG - IGNUS, the technical educational partner agency of the Orissa State education department, had designed interventions for inclusive ECCE education for tribal children by developing contextualised materials in four tribal languages and training of teachers in using mother tongue based ECCE curriculum.

The above experiences asks us to reflect upon the larger question -

Given the plurality of religious , regional, linguistic, caste, class, gendered and ethnic identities of children (girls and boys), why do our educational programmes fail to address development needs of children who don't fit into the dominant discourse of 'mainstream' identity? Then there are also issues of inequitable access and lack of acceptance of differences and diversity related to age, physical, social and mental abilities of children. There is so much of difference and variety around us that it is impossible to say what is normal and what is mainstream!

It is therefore vital to expand our understanding of equity in education and of the term **inclusion** to address **pluralism** and **diversity**. Diversity encapsulates the myriad of differences between

^{iv} The state education department of Orissa government had hired Delhi-based IGNUS-ERG team, for developing the ECCE curriculum in four tribal languages. This project was supported by BVLF.

individuals of differing gender, race and culture but also differing languages, religions, values, abilities, socioeconomic status, and any other aspect that makes people different from one another. Together as we support and contribute to each other's lives it is best to accept, understand and protect diversity by being inclusive and celebrate differences. Such a notion of inclusion will ensure that our educational system doesn't allow for discrimination and no hierarchies of educational access, aspirations and outcomes for diverse sections of the society. Irrespective of the definition, equity in education calls for inclusion, empowerment, respect, fairness, justice, a sense of belongingness and no discrimination in any way whatsoever.

Inclusion recognises that the environment presents barriers to participation, access and learning opportunities and aims to reduce these obstacles. Inclusive practice recognizes difference rather than employing a one size fits all approach. However recognising differences and promoting inequality is not to be seen as meaning the same.

Powell (1994) articulates that 'equity' in education in the most inclusive way means that each student will be addressed as an individual, with instructional opportunities, content and approaches that meet his/her specific needs, strengths and interests. All students will be engaged in meaningful learning in a school environment that values differences and encourages students to participate actively in the learning process.

Glimpses of possibilities - examples of inclusive educational practice:

Nationally there are several illustrative examples where the project driven strategies have considerably facilitated school level or cluster level efforts to ensure inclusion of the most deprived. Convergence of a well-designed programme (KGBV), a motivated district office, interested and sensitive implementation partners (NGO or Mahila Samakhya) can help create a well-managed

residential school for girls where it is primarily guided by empowering and agency enhancement processes.

Partnership with a local industry or NGO, projects like Learning Guarantee Programme, Namma Shale and Institutional Capacity Development in Karnataka, Hunar and Utthan in Bihar, and special government programmes/projects like Mahila Samakhya and Meena Manch in various States focusing on gender empowerment issues have helped to reach out to girls and boys from very poor and vulnerable families and provide necessary support for learning. These interventions provided mechanisms for the coming together of the community, the school, the administration and external resources (NGO, CSR body) for a sense of joint ownership of schooling processes at different levels^v.

However, the success of all such projects depends on a combination of dynamic and highly motivated head teacher and a team of good teachers and genuine community participation and involvement and politically responsive educational administration. The learning from such innovative projects need to inform the mainstream government educational programme.

Sensitivity of teachers to extremely deprived children and the individual motivation of the head master/head mistress is the ultimate formula of a well-managed, sensitive and engaged school. The onus of responsibility of providing equitable education lies on the teacher. There is tremendous scope and opportunity in teacher education and educational leadership management programmes to meaningfully and sensitively invest in enhancing their knowledge, skills and capacities to support the diverse development and learning needs of children from vulnerable and marginalised sections of the society.

^v These good practices were part of the research study entitled, 'School Management for Quality Inclusive Education and Decentralised School Governance'. This was supported by European Union and conducted by ERU Consultants Pvt. Ltd. under the leadership of the National Steering Committee. It was set up as a joint collaboration between Ministry of Human Resource Development and European Union in 2010 entitled 'Exchange of International Best Practices in Education-Actions in India and Overseas' leading to innovation in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

A paradigm shift in the power relationship between teachers and students from disadvantaged backgrounds is the need of the hour. This can only happen when teachers modify their teaching in ways that bring about academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and social class groups (Banks, 2004) and the teachers are supported by progressive educational administration which is politically committed to uphold the fundamental values and principles laid in our constitution.

“When you enroll a child, you actually enroll a family” (Imtoul, Kameniar and Bradley, 2009).

There are several studies and results from projects under DPEP, SSA and non government educational programmes that show that greater involvement of parents in the school and closer school-parent-community linkages could help enhance quality and thereby improve learning outcomes. There is a

sense of pride and ownership of the school amongst community members. This would mean creating enabling spaces for teacher and head teacher to form strong and respectful partnerships with families and communities in order to provide the best support for children’s learning and development and build mutual accountability mechanisms to identify and remove barriers to equitable and quality education.

To be inclusive in our approach to life’s situations requires dialogue that is based on equality and mutuality. The best way to begin is to start with ourselves. Let’s begin to look at the world as a beautiful multihued painting with each colour, the smallest of stroke and pattern contributing to its wholeness.

In Rabindranath Tagore’s words, “Differences give birth to diversity; Togetherness protects diversity”.

Vandana currently works with Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. In a span of over 25 years of her entire working experience, she has enjoyed wearing different hats- as a gender equality advocate, an activist, a feminist trainer. She has worked with children’s education programmes, reviewed and developed child-centered and rights-based educational training and teaching learning practices and has managed the gender and HIV portfolio in UN Women and taken up assignments for gender, education and development-based action research and process documentation . She salutes and shares the spirit of her fellow beings who represent the spirit of human ingenuity and courage to build a world free of deprivation, discrimination and violence. She may be contacted at vandana.mahajan@azimpremjifoundation.org