



Of Educational Rights and Teaching Challenges: To Include and How to Include

Siddhi Vyas

Effecting inclusion involves an attitude of acceptance. The diversity of faiths, customs, languages, and ethnicities in India places us in professional, social, personal situations where we are presented with opportunities to practice inclusion-- and for acceptance of the differences. In many ways then we have been practicing aspects of inclusion-exclusion in our routines of work, social and personal practices. Given the diversities within our context inclusion as a concept is thus not new to Indian society or to its ancient and/or traditional practices. To note a few examples, the state and society's responsibilities towards those in the community unable to care for themselves was outlined by Kautilya (c.320 BC) in his presentation on *Formation of Villages, Duties of Government Superintendents (Shamasastry, 1956)*. Records also indicate the socially inclusive approaches to education observed through *madrasah* education during the reign (1556-1605) of Akbar (Choudhary, 2008). In a related example a beloved historical collection of fables and morals, *Panchatantra*, provides an illustration of attending to differences and adapting teaching to learning needs. A pre-colonial, possibly the first known text on pedagogy, *Panchatantra* relied on dialogue and connecting learning goals to examples from the animal kingdom; it was inspired out of the need to teach 'discourteous' princes (Shastri, 1967, p.2) who were 'unteachable' and 'hostile' to education' (Ryder, 1949 p.12).

In some form or another then, our formal systems have been attempting or applying inclusive approaches. This discussion focuses on aspects of including children with disabilities in regular schools. An intensified policy focus on inclusive education for persons with disabilities commenced

following the disability rights movement and the introduction of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's inclusive education provisions brought its practice more formally into the classrooms and to the teachers' professional routine work and interactions. Recent developments in policy, particularly following the Right to Education Act (2009) have sharpened the focus on education for all in India and have now put inclusive education under greater scrutiny from teachers and researchers. Following the recent legislative measures, practicing inclusive education has now become a question of conscious decision-making, of observing instances where our practices may not have been inclusive.

To those advocating for disability rights, inclusive education offers a sense of encouragement that the existing student abilities and prevailing strengths will be recognized-- the potentials that are overshadowed instead, by a focus on attributes restraining educational and social practices from embracing the children with impairments. For the parents, the promise of inclusive education brings renewed hope of the schools, classrooms and ultimately, the classmates accepting their child. For the teachers, there is likely anxiousness in ensuring the teaching is effective and helps achieve their goals that also meet the legal expectations for the classrooms. For those of us who are connected here due to the recognition of the need to improve schooling or, because of our concerns for education of children with impairments, the inclusive practice offers hope towards addressing the educational inequalities. Inclusive education thus presents opportunities to embrace the groups of students who historically, culturally, or pedagogically have not had the same access to education as the majority may have had.

Implementing the policy's intent involves consciously bringing a shift in our attitude; putting the policy in practice calls for planning purposively to create, foster and practice in an inclusive classroom and school culture. So, are our classrooms ready? What should teacher preparations involve, towards formally addressing diversities in their planning and practices? To address these queries I draw on my own teaching experiences as well as those from more recent work preparing teacher education material for inclusive public classrooms.

Accepting differences, including diversity

As presented earlier, practicing inclusion implicates the quality of acceptance. Expecting and accepting that there are student differences and diverse ways of learning would be among the first steps towards creating an inclusive culture in our classrooms and schools. This is among the most valuable lessons I have held close to me as a teacher, owing in large part to my own early schooling experiences. It is a lesson that my own students would remind me of as well, through my years of work in and with varying classroom settings.

An inclusive approach to teaching calls for sensitivity in planning, in use of language and a recognition of teaching-learning styles to help create a culture that reflects an acceptance of differences - of gender, of faiths and ethnicities, of languages, learning styles and abilities. A consideration that is quite possibly intimidating for a teacher planning for the inclusive classroom. As a teacher and a teacher educator however, I have learned that it is in fact productive to plan for lessons while consciously considering the students' diversities. Rather than focus on and attend individually to diverse needs in my classrooms, over time I came to instinctively plan around the diversities. Teaching a group including students with medical, physical, sensory and cognitive needs

became a creative process with my colleagues¹, often a joy when incorporating into my classroom planning and organization the students' attributes, their personalities, strengths, preferences and needs. The understanding that inclusive education for all can help rather than complicate the practice is important. It is also important to recognize the different approaches that may be effectively utilized in making the efforts at inclusivity more successful.

Building on strengths and differences as strategies for inclusive classrooms

We had just not imagined that we could teach all [emphasis added] students in the classroom together this way.² (Regular public school teacher, NCERT workshop, January 2014).

We received the above feedback at the end of a workshop focusing on teaching in regular classrooms that may have students with sensory, physical, cognitive and/or multiple impairments in it. Our participants were all regular elementary public school teachers. Although the focus of the ongoing workshop series is on including students with impairments in regular classrooms, my underlying objective when preparing teacher education materials for our public schools has been to help teachers recognize that there is no one approach to reach all students, regardless of the similarities or the diversities of classroom make up. Our related work has also helped reveal that teachers are finding this thinking to be practical and, further validating our efforts, have suggested extended sessions for subsequent workshops on the topic.

“Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history ...” (Mandela, 1995, p. 84).

An understanding about the students, the possible experiences they may or may not have had, and

¹ Depending on individual student needs, a physical, occupational, speech therapists and/or orientation-mobility instructors need to be consulted to include their therapy goals for the student. Some programs I worked with additionally provided for art, music, and dance therapists. Incorporating their therapy goals in lesson-plans can enrich and ease working for the classroom goals.

² Translated from Hindi: “humne kabhi yeh socha hee nahi tha ki hum saare bacchon ko ek saath is tarah se bhee padha sakte hai”

their backgrounds is crucial in designing and defining a teacher's work with the class. I expand the connotation of the word language in the partial quote³ utilized above to foreground the importance of recognizing what the students present, the expressions of how they reveal their experiences, their understanding and their present worldviews.

Recognizing the language of their expressions has the potential to help the teacher in each of us understand, reach out and bring into the fold, those in the periphery.

To help the public school teachers make transitions to the expected changes for inclusive education with greater ease, the Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs (DEGSN) at the National

Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is developing teacher facilitative material.⁴ These include suggestions, tips, ideas and strategies developed through our research and from information collected through a series of workshops⁵ organized by the DEGSN involving regular and special education teachers. The ongoing workshops related to the teacher education material engage the teachers in hands-on activities to develop their own illustrations of inclusive approaches by adapting, modifying and planning lessons from the NCERT textbooks. Figure 1 presents a few of the suggestions based on my teaching experiences that we have shared in our work helping the teachers create an inclusive culture.

Figure 1



³ Full quote reads: "Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry, or savor their songs."

⁴ Vyas and Julka, in press.

⁵ In addition to semi-formal interviews the initial information for the teacher education handbook was collected through three workshops on: (i) Need Assessment held in July 2013 at the NCERT campus, New Delhi. Its participants included regular school teachers from public schools and resource teachers (ii) second workshop was held in September 2013 in Bangalore inviting practicing teachers and administrators from different disability areas, special education teachers and educators working in special as well as inclusive settings. (iii) the third workshop was held in October 2013 at the NCERT campus in Delhi, its participants included special teachers working in public as well as private schools, regular school teachers from public schools, and representatives from the Department of Elementary Education (DEE), NCERT.

A part of an online interview with Bill Nye (1955), an American science educator has become a popular citation; “[e]veryone you will ever meet knows something you don't” (2012). This quote highlights the importance of involving the students in your efforts at inclusivity. Teaching is rewarding if also exhausting work and planning for an inclusive classroom may seem an especially challenging task. As presented earlier, organizing around challenges, incorporating innovative practices, and utilizing

resources when specialized services are needed can help make inclusive teaching experiences effective and also enjoyable. In the process, students engaging in learning through the inclusive experience will learn of the similarities and differences amongst themselves; the realization that each one of them is indeed different and therefore special because he or she can contribute to this collaborative process in their own unique ways, would be a significant achievement.

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Siddhi Vyas, Ed.D., has been engaged in educational development work for over 20 years; she has been a teacher in private and public schools in India and the US, and with the International Rescue Committee, NY; she has also worked as a teacher educator at The University of TX, Austin, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where she pursued graduate scholarship in Educational Studies and Curriculum, Instructional development. Through her doctoral research on education and development studies at Columbia University’s Teachers College, she explored state and civil society collaboration in formulation and implementation of National education policy. She pursued the comparative policy study in India’s rural and urban private and public schools. She has been a faculty at the Azim Premji Foundation’s teaching programs in its University since its inception and until 2013. She has provided consultations at NCERT’s Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs in developing teacher education materials, and at the Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) on developing a post-graduate course of studies at the TISS School of Social Work’s Center for Disability Studies and Action. Currently she is working on writing a book based on her doctoral research. She can be contacted at srv12@columbia.edu and siddhivyas@gmail.com