IMPROVING SCHOOLS, DEVELOPING INCLUSION

*Dr. Manju Jain & **Dr. Pooja Pasrija

---- Abstract ----

The overall goal of inclusive education and child friendly education is developing educational settings where all learners are welcome, participating and treated equally. Present Research focuses on present situation of the schools regarding inclusion of differently abled students. It also gives clear-cut idea about barriers faced by teachers in implementation of strategies necessary for successful inclusion. It is an attempt to meet the unique needs of every child in a regular school setting where all children, including those with disability, try to participate in all facets of school life. Access to basic education lies at the heart of development. The goal is to provide accommodating and personalized education for all students within the context of a general educational classroom. The need of the hour is to develop a universal design of learning which makes learning joyful for all children. Current legislation that determines the civil rights of a student with disabilities can be clouded by districts due to differing interpretations of the law. Definition of terms related to special education, mainstreaming, and inclusive schooling help to better understand educational Jargon concerning inclusion. Benefits of full inclusion reveal the progress students make socially and academically. There are some long-held beliefs that in inclusive settings children with diverse abilities will disrupt classes and impair the learning of the other children in a class, teachers will be unable to cope with the extra work expected of them, and children with diverse abilities will ultimately receive an inferior education and possibly come through the process with damaged self-esteem. But in reality, many of beliefs are founded more on preconceived notions than on any solid experience or evidence. The benefits of inclusion would seem too far outweigh any disadvantages.

Introduction

Inclusive education, which has its origin in special education, originally set out to meet the needs of learners who were being traditionally excluded from the school or were otherwise marginalized within the classroom. A series of shifts from focusing on the differently abled child as a problem to focusing on changes in the management of the classroom revealed surprising changes in learning. The results demonstrated benefits to those who were traditionally excluded from learning as well as all the others in the classroom. Today inclusive education or 'inclusion in education' is a conceptual approach aimed at achieving quality education by making changes to accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, social or psychological differences. Inclusive education recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

partnerships with their communities. While inclusive beliefs, policies and practices specifically address the needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs, they are equally beneficial for the full range of students. Schools that are inclusive adopt the belief that wherever possible all children should learn together regardless of their differences; that all children can learn and achieve their potential; and that the continuum of students' should be matched by the continuum of programs, support and services. All students regardless of their ability or disability benefit from schools adopting inclusive practices.

Suppositions of Inclusiveness:

- A school's enrolment practices do not discriminate between students with disabilities and those without disabilities;
- School services and facilities are equally accessible to students with disabilities and those without disabilities;
- Curriculum programs are designed in such a way that the learning needs of all students are catered for;
- Assessment and certification procedures are responsive to the learning outcomes targets and goals of students with and without disabilities;
- Specialist services and equipment that students need to be able to experience success with their learning are supplied; and
- The school environment is friendly and teachers and students respond positively to student diversity.

An inclusive education is characterized by a blurring of boundaries between children with and those without additional learning needs, so that the focus is on: the level of capacity each individual child possesses to learn and progress; the learning and wellbeing outcomes sought; the environment and support which the school undertakes to provide.

Effective Schools:

Effective schools are schools that produce learning outcomes for all students that are above typical expectations. Such schools do not settle for average performance, but take action to ensure that their teaching and learning environments and programs are highly responsive to the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities as having sets of capabilities that need to be further developed and determine educational provision accordingly. Effective schools are also inclusive schools. Broadly speaking, effective schools have developed whole-school processes that promote inclusive education and teaching and classroom practices that are responsive to the individual needs and diverse learning styles of students. Some of the key characteristics of effective and inclusive schools can be summarized as;

An effective and inclusive school:
- Is driven by a moral imperative to improve the learning outcomes of all students regardless of their capacities and backgrounds;

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

- Adopts a whole school focus that is reflected in the school's vision, beliefs, policies and practices;
- Is deeply committed to the belief that all children can learn; Recognises that all students have special learning needs of one sort or another;
- Focuses on student's learning needs rather than on their learning disabilities;
- Provides learning programs and tasks that are targeted to students' learning styles, interests and needs;
- Has high expectations of students, sets unambiguous but challenging achievement targets, rewards effort and celebrates success;
- Is alert to and uses a range of multi-skilled personnel (e.g. teachers, specialists, aides, clinicians, volunteers and other students) to assist students with their learning;
- Has a strong performance and development culture that support all staff and volunteers to continuously improve their effectiveness to promote student learning;
- Adopts a team teaching approach to meeting the diverse needs of learners;
- Adopts an open classroom structure that enables various grouping series to be assembled for teaching and learning;
- Helps students to identify learning targets, regularly monitors performance and provides constructive feedback to students and parents on learning progress and challenges and how these can be achieved;
- Provides additional support links with parents, clinicians, caregivers, staffs in local special schools, disability services providers and relevant support agencies within the wider community.

Each of the above characteristics or practices can be located in our schools, but not all of the characteristics are evident, or are not implemented as effectively as they need to be in all the schools. Schools that are exemplary models of inclusiveness and effectiveness are working on a variety of fronts to sustain their inclusiveness and effectiveness. They understand that to sustain effectiveness and inclusiveness adjustments may need to be made to school buildings, curriculum content, assessment procedures and methodologies, the format and suitability of teaching materials, learning activities, modes of delivery and teaching styles. They also understand that as our knowledge improves about how learning occurs, today's good practices will in due course provide the platform for and be replaced by a new generation of more effective practices.

The following subheadings are used to signpost areas for reflection and action:
- An inclusive school is a school with strong moral purpose. It believes that its purpose is to assist all students to learn and to keep them engaged with learning regardless of their ability or disability. It not only believes it can make a difference to a students' learning, it has high and unambiguous expectations for student learning, demands student effort and organizes its resources to optimize students' opportunities for learning. High expectations are never met without the appropriate level of effort. Securing student effort is the responsibility of the teachers and in effective schools teachers are highly adept at identifying student

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

interests and designing learning tasks that motivate students to try hard and be achievement oriented.

- Inclusive schools make purposeful and strategic decisions about the allocation of teaching and learning resources. A school that is alert to the diverse needs of students would seek to optimize the personnel and resources within a classroom that are available to support student learning. Inclusive schools understand that students' development needs are best promoted through a collaborative approach and by focusing on the students' learning needs rather than on their disability. They understand that a range of multi skilled personnel are available to support students with their learning and that decisions about the allocation of special program funds should be based on the desire to make the classroom a rich learning environment for all where additional support is available for those with special needs.

Teachers in inclusive schools know their students and their learning needs. They are able to adapt current pedagogical knowledge and meaningful learning experiences. They reflect on their adaptations and continually seek to improve their ability to design and deliver curriculum and learning activities that are relevant to each child's real life experiences and needs. Teachers in inclusive schools are able to engage all students in productive learning, value the contribution of all students and work to create environments where all students can participate in and contribute meaningfully to the learning activities.

- A precondition for students learning is the establishment of an environment where students feel welcome, valued and cared for. A key element of effectiveness and

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

inclusiveness is the capacity to create supportive learning environments. Supportive and productive learning environments are evident when students are willing to step outside their comfort zone to explore and express new ideas, to work within various student groupings, to assume leadership or support roles and to assume greater personal responsibility for managing their learning. These schools establish learning environment that facilitates team teaching, the use of teacher aides, specialists or trained volunteers and to increase the flexibility to vary size and composition of classroom learning groups. By several modifications a space may be created for supervised structured play, silent reading or small group instruction or turned into a dedicated oral language centre that contains games, toys and other art facts that are used to stimulate student's imagination and oral language development.

- Inclusive schools have a culture of high professional trust and collegiality and a culture that fosters openness, inquiry, risk taking and innovation. Staff teams in inclusive schools meet regularly to provide each other with information and support and to review the progress of all students involved in the team's program. Inclusive schools are alert to the need to explore the role that specialists might play in supporting them to become more inclusive of students with additional needs.

- It is the combination of certain beliefs, policies and practices that help to characterize inclusive schools and differentiate them from other schools. Inclusive schools not only support the principle of inclusive education, if they make changes in their structures, processes and practices as required to translate this principle into action. However, initiating actions to adopt and improve upon the characteristics described in this paper needs to be approached strategically.

- School leaders in inclusive schools are adept at managing change and at building a school culture that is committed to inclusiveness and that is improvement oriented.

Benefits of Inclusion for Children with Disabilities:

These are some long-held beliefs that in inclusive settings children with diverse abilities will disrupt classes and impair the learning of other children in a class, teachers will be unable to cope with the extra work expected of them, and children with diverse abilities will ultimately receive an inferior education and possibly come through the process with damaged self-esteem. But in reality, many of beliefs are founded more on preconceived notions than on any solid experience or evidence. The benefits of inclusion would seem to far outweigh any disadvantage. Mc Gregor and Vogelsberg (1998) list the benefits of inclusion for children with disabilities based on a comprehensive review of research literature as follows:
- Children with disabilities demonstrate high levels of social interaction with non-disabled peers in inclusive settings when compared with segregated settings.

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

- Social competence and communication skills of children with diverse abilities are improved in inclusive settings. This is believed to be closely associated with greater opportunities for social interaction with non-disabled peers.
- Children with disabilities in inclusive settings often have a more rigorous educational programme, resulting in improved skill acquisition and academic gains.
- Social acceptance of children with diverse abilities is enhanced by the frequent small-group work nature of their instruction in inclusive classrooms. Children get to see beyond the disability when working in small groups, and begin to realize that they have much in common with children with disabilities.
- Friendships more commonly develop between children with disabilities and those without disabilities in inclusive settings. Research has found that children in inclusive settings have more durable networks of friends than children in segregated settings. This is especially true of children included in their local neighbourhood school, where they can more easily see friends outside of school hours.

Other benefits of inclusion for children with disabilities include that Inclusion assists in the development of general knowledge for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities who are included in regular schools tend to become adults who spend more time in leisure activities outside of the home, spend more time in leisure activities with adults without disabilities and spend more time in community work settings than do their counterparts educated in segregated settings. The arguments supporting inclusion are compelling. The opposing argument that children with diverse abilities receive an inferior standard of education in an inclusive setting, or are somehow socially disadvantaged, are difficult to sustain.

Benefits of inclusion for children without disabilities:

In many ways children without disabilities benefit from inclusion just as much as children with diverse abilities. The following benefits of inclusion for children without disabilities have been substantiated in the literature:

- Children without disabilities or giftedness can benefit from improved instructional technologies in the classroom. Other children can benefit from the presence of these technologies and can use when they are not required by the child with diverse abilities.

- Children without disabilities or giftedness can benefit from increased funds in the classroom. Extra funds and resources removed from 'special programmes' can be used in the regular classroom to enhance the learning of both children with diverse abilities and their peers.

- Children without disabilities or giftedness benefit from higher classroom staff ratios. Frequently, extra adult funding for children with diverse abilities is directed towards the provision of additional staff, either specialist teachers or para-professionals. In either case,

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

the presence of an adult in the classroom opens up a wide range of possibilities for all children.

- Children without disabilities or giftedness involved in peer-tutoring situations can benefit from improved self-esteem and mastery of academic content. Furthermore, it has been found that peer tutors demonstrate a higher mastery of academic content in a given area than do their peers who are not involved as tutors.

- Children without disabilities have the opportunity to learn additional skills such as Braille or sign language. These skills can be taught in a meaningful context and represent an opportunity for growth not often available to children who are not educated with others with diverse abilities. (McGregor and Vogelsberg,1998)

- Children without disabilities can learn to value and respect children with diverse abilities in inclusive classrooms. They learn to see past the disability or giftedness and the associated social stigmas when placed in inclusive classes.

The major support for inclusive education came from World Conference (1994) on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain. It was concluded in the conference that – " Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions."(Puri, Madhumita, Abraham George 2004)

Indian Society is naturally more inclusive than segregationist in nature. Starting from Gurukul System to western model of day-care system, efforts have been made to bring people in, rather than to keep them out. About 1.40 million (NIEPA, 2005) children with disabilities are in regular schools. Govt. of India has to accelerate the new scheme of Inclusive Education to achieve the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2010. (Ministry of Human Resource and Development, India) .Survey of various studies conducted on inclusive education in India & abroad helps to understand more about inclusion & its importance today. India has the second largest education system in the world, with 200 million children aged between 6 and 14, around 25 million of whom are out of school (World Bank, 2004). However, bearing in mind that apparently only 35% of children are registered at birth (UNICEF, 2004), others estimate between 35 to 80 million out-of-school children (Singal, 2005a).

The present day education system in India has come a long way and the age old traditions have undergone a new makeover. Government of India is doing lots of efforts in this field so that the objective of inclusive growth can be achieved very soon by it. A great achievement of the Indian government is a big jump in the literacy rate from 18.3% in 1950-51 to 74.04% in 2010-11. Such an achievement is the result of a lot of efforts by the Indian government in the education sector.

The government is improving the country's education status to enhance the standard of living of the people and also to achieve other goals like, overcoming the problem of poverty and unemployment, social equality, equal income distribution, etc. Education contributes to the individual's wellbeing as well as the overall development of the country. Education is not only

*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

an instrument of enhancing efficiency but is also an effective tool of widening and augmenting democratic participation and upgrading the overall quality of individual and societal life (Goel, 2008). Thus, the importance of education can't be ignored. There has not been any fundamental change in the structure of secondary and higher education in India. If there has been any such change, then only few of the states have been affected. The period since the nineties, especially since last decade, has witnessed growth in response to the demand generated by the expansion of elementary education. Primary as well as higher education sector have also witnessed great attention of the Indian Government.

It clearly emphasizes how important the role of school and teacher is, in dealing with inclusion, and making it successful. In the present scenario, it is seen that the previous system of education- general schools and special schools is now changing as inclusive schools. In this respect it becomes essential to assess the existing inclusive practices in the schools. Assessing the knowledge and acceptance level of teachers in the schools is needed. Attitudes of the teachers towards inclusion are also of much importance. We need to develop awareness about inclusion in the teachers. A survey in this respect is thus needed .It is also essential to sensitize teachers, the requirements of children with special needs through a program in inclusive education.

Conclusion:

The article focuses on inclusion being the need of the hour, which ensures that all people have access to a quality education. Inclusion improves educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. It more effectively target and measure student performance cross the whole system and enhance teacher capacity to deliver quality education programs to all students. In order to meet this commitment, school communities need to recognize and celebrate student diversity and create innovative, flexible and inclusive environments where all students, including students with disabilities and additional learning needs, feels safe and motivated to learn. Effective schools consistently cater for the diversity of their students' learning needs and it is this capacity that makes them both effective and inclusive. The brief description of the characteristics of effective and inclusive schools and the questions for reflection are provided to stimulate discussion about the beliefs, policies and practices that schools need to embrace in order to become highly effective in responding to the diversity of their student's academic, social and personal learning needs. The article also seeks to promote action directed at making our schools more inclusive and effective.

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*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak

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*Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak
** Assistant Professor, Vaish College of Education, Rohtak