

Embracing Inclusion: The Role of the School Head

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a largely misunderstood and misinterpreted as a concept and practice in the context of the Indian schooling system, even though it has received significant support from policy and legislative markers in the country in the recent years. Exemplars of inclusive education are few and mostly found as isolated examples of schools driven by individual motivation to adopt the core values of inclusion in their institutions. Majority of such examples show the key role played by the school leadership in guiding and transmitting the culture and vision of inclusion to members of the school community. The paper is based on a research study that interrogated the role of the school head in adopting inclusive practices in two private schools in Bangalore. The study found that the school head played an important role in transmitting the culture of inclusion as well as influenced the beliefs and practices adopted by the members of the community significantly. Where the school leader adopted a more collaborative manner to transmit the culture of inclusion, the teachers too internalized the values of inclusion and adopted practices that were closer to the ethos, as opposed to a situation where the school head imposed her own beliefs on the teachers without much opportunity for dialogue and discussion.

Keywords: *inclusion, inclusive school, disadvantaged section, educational administration*

Introduction

As an academic and researcher interested in inclusive education, it is not very often that one comes across too many good exemplars of inclusion in our country. We are still very far from implementing inclusion in letter and spirit on a large scale or even from developing a consensual understanding of what inclusion really implies in practice. Nevertheless, over the two decades or so, I have come across at least a few regular schools in different parts of the country where one can see some attempts at inclusion-in varying degrees and of varying standards. The schools that I have come across are mostly private but of very diverse kinds-some are high end, private, schools that could boast of international standards with all possible resources at their disposal, some others are moderate to high fee paying, well-meaning private schools with adequate resources, while a handful of others are poorly resourced, low fee paying schools owned by private trusts or managing on donations and government aid. As a researcher with interest in understanding inclusive environments, an elemental question for me has always been, *what makes schools embrace inclusion?* or in other words, given that

there is hardly any mandate for private schools to 'become' inclusive, *why is it that some schools choose to do so?*

In this paper I examine this question and explicate specifically the role played by the school heads in adopting inclusive practices in their schools. The paper is based on my observations of inclusive schools and my research that involved conducting detailed interviews with school heads and teachers about their motivations, beliefs, and contribution towards creating opportunities in their schools for children with disabilities to study with their non-disabled peers. The paper attempts to discuss first, albeit very briefly, some issues with respect to inclusive education in the Indian context that must be elucidated in order to arrive at an understanding about implementing inclusive practices in the Indian school system.

Inclusive Education in India

Inclusive education is a largely misinterpreted and misunderstood concept in the Indian context. While much has been written about it in the recent years and it has found favourable mention in all recent, prominent policy and legislative markers in the country (RTE, 2009, RPwD Act,

2016, and most recently, the NEP, 2020) it is yet to find a perceptible place in the mainstream education discourse in India. Scholars and researchers interested in the pursuit of inclusive education as a subject of study in the Indian context, have struggled to find apposite academic resources outside of those available under special needs education or disability studies discourses. This has resulted in a rather circumscribed view about inclusive education emerging, wherein it is perceived as a way of addressing the issues of the education of children with disability alone, and something that is worthy of consideration only after the problems of education of “normal” children in the country are solved!

At this stage, it might help to foreground the premises on which inclusive education is actually based. Inclusive education arose as a result of the emergence of the social model of disability and the restrictions imposed by the prevalent models of integration and mainstreaming to the access and participation of children with different learning needs in the regular school system (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou 2010). Hence, inclusive education in principle, strives to provide a meaningful learning experience to *all* children along with their peers, irrespective of their learning needs. As a concept that held appeal and seemed relatively simple to comprehend in principle, it gained popularity and found its way in several education policy and programme documents over the years in India. However, while we embraced the idea in principle, we failed to deliberate adequately on its implementation. As a result, over the years, inclusive education has remained elusive, and often either confused with integration or believed to be unrealistic and difficult to realize in practice (Madan, 2018). Hence, with little systemic support and poor understanding on ground, practitioners of inclusion remain few and far between—only a handful of individuals or institutions driven by their own motivations and commitment towards realizing inclusion in their silos.

It is in this regard that I became interested in researching such institutions—private schools that have, by their own initiative, embraced inclusion and have adopted practices that managed to bring children with diverse learning needs within the regular school system. I have been particularly interested in the role played by

the school head in bringing about this change in their schools and how the position they take influences the culture of inclusion that evolves in the process. The narrative in this paper is based on my observations of two schools in the city of Bangalore and is part of a larger research study.

The Inclusive Schools

I will refer to the two schools as the IS and the JS. Both the schools are located in the south of Bangalore and are run by private entities. Below is a brief description of the schools and their inclusive education programmes. It is important to mention here that the schools included in the study were identified as inclusive based purely on the schools’ explicit admission of an inclusion policy. I did not evaluate or assess the inclusive measures that they had adopted before selecting the schools as this was not the purpose of my study. I was interested in exploring the nature of the programmes as they were, and as perceived by different stakeholders in the schools.

The IS school

A mid-size private school set up some 13 years ago, the English medium, moderate fee paying school is located in suburban Bangalore and has infrastructure and facilities that can be described as ‘very good’ by any standards. Affiliated to a central board of education, the school also offers the open school option to students who may not be able to cope with the regular school curriculum. The IS caters to children from middle class families mostly from the area. The teachers, according to the principal are hired because of their passion for teaching and not so much because of their qualifications. Several teachers are parents of children studying in the school. Classroom interactions and pedagogy seem to be based mostly on rote based learning with emphasis on traditional methods of learning. However, teachers do seem compassionate and friendly towards the children. The inclusion policy is explicitly stated on their website with the motto: “*quality education for all*”. It admits children without any screening and has gradually gained the reputation of being a school where children with special needs are welcome. At the time of the study, about 20 per cent of the children in the school had an identifiable special need.

IS follows multiple practices to accommodate children with varied learning needs. Majority of the children with special needs in the primary

school attend regular classes where teachers are sensitized towards the children's special needs, shadow teachers are permitted to sit in the regular classes for one on one instruction for some students, exemption from learning a third language is given, and children can opt for the NIOS (open school) scheme curriculum. Special sections have been set up for students in the middle and high school where instruction is provided in smaller groups while the children are included for all other extra-curricular activities.

The JS school

The JS school used to be a government aided school when it was set up in 1984. It is now funded by a religious trust and is part of a larger conglomerate of educational institutions owned by the trust. The school with about 600 children is a Kannada medium, low fee paying school that caters to children from lower socioeconomic status families. The children attending the school belong to traditional Kannadiga families whose parents may be employed either in low wage jobs or run small businesses of their own. Most teachers in the school have been around for many years and seem to be fairly well immersed in its culture and purpose. The infrastructure facilities at the JS are very basic and the school can hardly boast of being well equipped with any modern technology or facilities.

Currently the school admits children with special needs at the elementary school level, specifically to attend its inclusive education programme. All children are screened to determine the nature and degree of disability and then assigned to a 'readiness programme' for a period of 1-3 years based on their specific needs. Special educators work with the children intensively in small groups preparing them to cope with regular classroom curriculum into which they would be included after completion of the readiness programme. A large majority of the special needs students at the JS have hearing impairments. The school, as a policy, encourages language learning over the use of sign language for these children. As children are gradually included into regular classes, they attend classes along with their non-disabled peers for most part of the school day. Some children attend remedial classes in the afternoon to ensure they are able to cope with the curriculum. Regular class teachers make some accommodations for the children like using visual aids (for children with hearing impairments), speaking slowly, repeating

concepts and facilitating peer support. No other accommodations are made to the curriculum, pedagogy or assessment for the special needs children. Teachers however remain in touch with the special educators on a regular basis to exchange notes on the children's progress and regularly discuss ways of dealing with individual difficulties that the children may be facing.

My conversations with the school principals and select teachers were around the origins of inclusion in their respective schools, their own beliefs about inclusion, why they had chosen to adopt inclusion in their schools, what kind of support and challenges they had faced along the way, and how they had managed to convey their vision and practices to other members of the school community to create and transmit a culture of inclusion.

In the next section of the paper I elucidate the role played by the school heads in the two schools that I studied, and then accentuate its importance in the context of the status of inclusive education practices in India.

The Role of the School Head

Several studies have established the transformational role that the school leadership can play in creating inclusive school cultures (e.g., Ekins, 2016; Leo & Barton, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron 2015; Schmidt & Venet, 2012). McLeskey and Waldron (2015) identified the role of the school principal as one among the three most important factors in developing effective inclusive schools..... "strong, active principal leadership ensures that teachers share core values and an institutional commitment to developing an effective inclusive school" (p. 68). Ekins (2016), reaffirming the role of the school leader suggests that since inclusion requires significant changes in the school environment, it is important to study the role of school leadership in a new light, and to examine it from the leader's own perspective. The importance of school leadership in embracing inclusion was quite evident in both the schools that I studied. I also found that the role of the school head was central in perpetuating the inclusive culture that prevailed in the schools.

Origins of inclusion

The JS school, with its humble beginnings adopted inclusion around 1989 when two of its teachers who themselves had children with

special needs could not find any other school to send them to. As these children started coming to the school, the then very young and dynamic school principal, Mrs. G started to search for ways to help these children learn better. The journey towards formally setting up an inclusive education programme began from there. The early years were full of struggle and challenges as not many people understood inclusion at the time.

At the IS School, the principal, an experienced and senior teacher decided to set up her own school after she found the school management of the school where she previously worked, was not fully convinced or supportive of her ideals of inclusion. In both the cases, the school heads were uncompromising about their beliefs and decided to realize their values in practice, no matter what the pitfalls.

Beliefs and practices

At the IS, at the time of appointment itself, teachers are informed about the inclusive model and several steps are taken to educate them about the practices adopted by the school in this regard. Taking the lead, Mrs. D the principal, conducts several sessions herself in which the teachers are sensitized to expect children with diverse learning needs in their classrooms, the practices that they can adopt in order to work with them, and the support systems available in the school. Occasionally, special educators and psychologists are also invited to address teachers and to conduct workshops with them on aspects of desirable classroom practices or assessment modifications for children with special needs. Classroom observations show that the teachers are sensitive and attentive towards the children with special needs. Often, teachers make special efforts such as spending extra time with a child in explaining a concept or helping the child grapple with a text in reading it aloud or solving a math sum. However, other than that, there is no evidence of any curricular adaptations or differentiated pedagogical practices. Children with special needs are exempted from learning a third language and assessment is modified to the extent of giving extra time, fewer questions, large font size or accepting only brief answers. All these practices are followed across classrooms and are driven and motivated by the spirit of inclusion that the school principal has managed to inculcate in the members of the school community.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they take pride in their association with the inclusion model of the school and refer to it as their “*good fortune*” to be members of such an inclusive community. It is however evident that members of the school community attribute the reason for this transformation of their thinking towards inclusion almost entirely to the efforts of the school principal. Mrs. D’s vision has guided and provided the motivation for all the teachers to become committed to the cause. While this widespread belief and strong commitment lends huge impetus to the programme, it is not clear if the core values of inclusion have been truly internalized, if the ideology of inclusion has been actually understood, or does it remain at a superficial level and has been embraced as someone else’s vision and a “good cause” that the teachers learn to subscribe to. It was also found that the teachers do not necessarily have an informed understanding or their own notion/vision of inclusion. Their ideas seem to be formed only from what they have been told, and their subscription to these ideas arises from a belief not in inclusion, (as a form of social justice or a means of attaining equity etc.) but of doing service to society and extending charity to a disadvantaged section of society. Nevertheless, children studying at the school are not discriminated against by teachers, they benefit academically from the various accommodations provided, and the peer interactions are friendly and free of any bias or prejudice.

At the JS, the school principal practices a more collaborative form of leadership wherein the teachers are seen as equal partners and contributing members to the development of an inclusive vision and culture in the school. While the principal has always led from the front, she attributes the culture of inclusion in the school to the efforts put in by the teachers. She lays emphasis on regular training and autonomy of the teachers in experimenting with newer methods to overcome the challenges and work with the children. She also believes that the cooperation of the regular teachers and their eagerness to work in collaboration with the special educators is key to the success of the programme. The teachers attribute much of the understanding that they have developed about inclusion to the conversations that are held within their peer groups and see the school principal as spearheading and guiding the inclusive model adopted by the school. The

readiness programme adopted by the school is led by special educators with vast experience in their respective fields. The children are well-prepared for inclusion by the time they enter regular classes because the teachers have identified and worked on their individual needs and are able to provide continued support through the after school remedial programme. It is noteworthy that the JS school with its minimum resources has managed to implement a quality programme for children with special needs belonging to the lower socioeconomic classes with almost no external support.

In the absence of any significant guidance from policy and systemic support, the decision of a private school with limited resources to embrace and practice inclusion is worthy of appreciation. Both the schools included in my research had adopted inclusion at their own initiative, mostly because of the beliefs and conviction held by the school leader, on which they had decided to act upon, against all odds. Their vision and perseverance are laudable and should be a source of inspiration to other institutions.

My study also showed that besides being the vanguard of such a vision, the school head also carries the responsibility of transmitting the culture of inclusion and shaping the beliefs of the members of the school community. The culture she transmits, shapes the practices and convictions that help construct the inclusive model in the school. A school leader who imposes her own beliefs without encouraging healthy dialogue among the stakeholders may inhibit an organic understanding of inclusion as an ideology to evolve. Members of such a community may not comprehend its true essence and may misconstrue their own role in the process. The notion of charity and goodwill that I sensed among the teachers at the IS was perhaps a result of such a style of leadership.

On the other hand, a more collaborative form of leadership where members are given the room to freely express their concerns and deliberate on how they can co-construct and participate in building an inclusive community, are likely to embrace its true essence and contribute more effectively in realizing it. The attitude the teachers at the JS was quite reflective of this

spirit in the expression of their beliefs as well as their actions. Teachers believed that every child in their class was capable of achieving academic success and it was their responsibility to help them reach their potential. They were willing to do so by adopting different means-by empowering themselves with newer methods of teaching and collaborating with their more knowledgeable peers.

In Conclusion

The evidence from my research is congruent with the findings of other studies which accentuate the importance of the role played by the school leadership in adopting and implementing inclusive practices. The study also shows that the leader's role is key in guiding and mentoring members of the school community in determining the culture and ethos that the school adopts. This in turn has implications for the nature of the inclusive education programme that is implemented in the school. For instance, classroom processes, distribution of roles and responsibilities among teachers, the nature of curricular and pedagogic adaptations, modification and flexibility in assessment, teacher development initiatives, etc., are some key components of an inclusive programme that are impacted by the vision and core values of inclusion that is conveyed to the members of the school community. In the context of the schooling system in India where inclusion continues to be a vexed issue and there is little consensus or systemic support in place to guide or support the implementation of inclusive education programmes, the role of the school head becomes absolutely imperative. Perhaps some proactive measures can be taken to create a forum where exchange of ideas, sharing of success stories and deliberations on the concept and ideology of inclusion can take place among school leaders and teachers-from both the public and private school systems. It is important for all of us to realize that adopting inclusion is no longer a matter of choice, it is an inevitability and each one of us has a responsibility towards realizing it.

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