

Book Review

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Hanging On -A Special Educator's Journey Into Inclusive Education by Kanwal Singh puts forward a persuasive case for change in the field of special education. Bold and unapologetically upfront, the book brings to surface usually awaited issues such as the tensions between the inclusive theory and practice, the grip of traditional expertise, the creeping enough commercial interest and educator burn out. It is presented in unconventional style using humour and totally free of jargon. The non-technical and fresh language makes the book a very welcome change.

Looking back at the education of the persons with disabilities in ancient India, where it was given in the communities in which they lived, it was given in the mainstream schools alongside the non handicapped peers in a Gurukulum setting. The teachers gave individualised instructions based on the individual child's needs and age. As an act of dharma(a duty) a few residential institutions were established by the members of the royalty at different locations. During the colonial period and after, special schools were established mostly in urban areas and were expensive. However, in the post-independence years India had special schools run by the government as well as non government organizations for the persons with disabilities. The special schools were not sufficient looking at the vast population in need of special education. From there the concept of integration and then inclusion.

Education for children with disabilities has been on a rollercoaster ride, witnessing several highs and lows. The author herself has been in this journey for almost three decades. In this book, she has made a deliberate attempt to disturb and shake up the existing status quo within the special education and the inclusive education community. It also acts as a springboard for future discussions leading to a change of course for the education of children with disabilities.

The inclusion theory sounds beautiful but it does not have backing of adequate tools and strategies to guide inclusive practice. The cut copy paste technique has been applied by simply lifting practises from special education model calling

them inclusive and applying them in the mainstream schools.

The book is divided in five chapters, from the time when the disabilities has witnessed a series of switches in philosophy from special education, integrated education to inclusive education. Highlighting how these declarations and conventions have made an impact on special education journey but with so many of them it has resulted in hodgepodge of special and inclusive education. Confusion in many areas has resulted in hotspots of special and inclusive education practises. Inclusion has become an overused and under defined term. People have spent decades in this field but still struggles to figure out the answers of some fundamental questions related to inclusion.

The special education schools get funding and resources, as a result of this, there has been a bombardment of news, new training forces, assistive devices, equipment, apps technology, educational aids, toys and books. It also depicts the dilemma that teachers face in implementing inclusive education. Besides this mainstream schools have invested resources in vision building exercises to bring teachers and special educators on board with the idea of inclusive education. Many schools have whipped up and displayed beautifully designed vision boards that pledged to strive towards an inclusive world where all people including persons with disability, have equal rights and opportunities. Unfortunately, that's where it all usually seems to stop. The reform seems to be stuck on thinking and very little in practice. Education of children with disabilities has been a tough journey with a lot of breakers.

In spite of the mounting evidence something is not working, we continue to trudge along, doing what we are used to doing. The idea of this book is to get the message out to as many people in the special community as possible. There is an urgent need for the special and inclusive education community to question their beliefs and actions.

The concept of inclusive education

Whatever accommodations are needed, are to be made in the mainstream schools. There should be no segregated education because eventually, every person must become a part of the mainstream society. As humans, we cannot exist in social and occupational silos. That's the concept. Inclusive education took special educators away from the special environments. Now they needed to operate within mainstream environments. They needed to become facilitators, educators, counsellors, and liaison persons for students with disabilities, mainstream school teachers and administrators, and the parents of students with disabilities. Special educators became inclusive education experts, and even activists and advocates.

It was easier said than done. Amidst fancy nomenclatures, esoteric concepts and confounding situations, most of the special educators lost track of what exactly they were trying to achieve and what was the role in the fast-changing environment. The ground reality is quite different. Mainstream teachers and students find it difficult to adjust with students with different needs, and vice versa.

The author asks some sore questions from her community of professionals: who they are, what they intend to achieve, what is the future course of action and where the professions of special education and inclusive education are heading? She grabs the bull by its horns.

There are more questions and less answers but then, the objective of this book doesn't seem to be providing answers. The objective seems to be to provoke the status quo and shake her colleagues out of the inertia they have either fallen into or pretend to be living in. She calls it the Lala land.

The objective is to encourage them to question their place in the larger scheme of things. Hence, more than providing answers, the intention of the

book is to instigate a journey towards finding the answers. The book has been written in a very easy, conversational manner with the liberal smattering of hand drawn illustrations and graphics.

The target readers are special educators, inclusive education experts and all those who are interested in these subjects or those who have some sort of stake (students with disabilities and their parents and guardians). Even mainstream educators should read the book to get a completely different perspective on what goes on in the life of an inclusive education expert and what steps can be taken to make education more inclusive for all.

Inclusive education is a wonderful concept, but one which for many years has been at risk of getting lost in a sea of mediocre, donor-pleasing, one-off projects that seem oblivious to the education revolution that's really required. This book gives us a light-hearted yet powerful reminder of the changes needed. And if it makes you feel uncomfortable because it challenges the way you have been working, don't feel offended. Stop, reflect, and change!"

Inclusion in the current scenario has done its bit and is at a juncture where it desperately needs to be reviewed. This book should be distributed to the many inclusive education project managers in various agencies, bilateral contractors and international NGOs, teachers and students. It will certainly help those who make policies or those who do not have a background as a teacher to understand the challenges that teachers face in implementing inclusion.

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