

Including the Visually Challenged Student: Journey of the Teacher

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Abstract *This paper attempts to explore the inclusion of students with visual challenge, from the perspective of the teacher. It examines issues such as, the dynamics of teacher-student relationship, teachers' perceptions about inclusive education, envisaging the role of teachers in inclusive classrooms and pedagogic interventions formulated to respond to the diversity of the classroom. It is based on a qualitative study located in the social construction of reality. Given the variations in the practice of inclusive education, teachers across different school settings were involved. School observations and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Data analysis led to the emergence of significant themes, which were interpreted to build a coherent narrative. The findings provide rich insight into the journey of teachers from initial apprehension at finding a student with visual challenge in their class, to subsequent involvement. The challenges they face and their ways of coping, reiterate the importance of taking into consideration the views of all stakeholders in order to meaningfully engage with the practice of inclusive education.*

Conceptualizing Inclusive Education

The right to live with dignity and self-respect is implicit in being human and education is an integral part of this. The Constitution of India ensures equality, freedom, justice and dignity to all individuals and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all. (www.socialjustic.nic.in)

Inclusion is an approach which takes into account the needs of all learners in mainstream classrooms. It welcomes diversity in terms of race, caste, gender, class and disability. Inclusive education is being analyzed at both the theoretical and practical levels. Perhaps this stems from an aspiration for an inclusive society and the recognition that inclusive education is a fundamental element of society where forces of marginalization are discouraged and community participation for all is promoted. The Director General of UNESCO, Matsuura (2008), has articulated his vision of inclusive education in the following words, "Inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform educational systems and enhance educational quality at all levels and in all settings in

order to respond to the diversity of learners and promote successful learning."

Journey towards Inclusion

The educational scenario for children with disabilities in India, as well as overseas, has seen a shift from segregation in terms of special education, towards integration and more recently, inclusion. There is a growing interest in inclusion, although special schools remain a popular option [Jangira,1995; Alur,1998; Alur and Natrajan,2000 as cited in Parasuram (2006), Disability and Society, 21 (3)].

The present article attempts to explore the inclusion of students with visual challenge, from the perspective of the teacher. It examines issues such as, the dynamics of teacher-student relationship, teachers' perceptions about inclusive education, envisaging the role of teachers in inclusive classrooms and pedagogic interventions formulated to respond to the diversity of the classroom.



Research Design

The research was qualitative in nature and aimed to explore the social construction of disability from the lens of the visually challenged. Guba and Lincoln (1989) explain how reality is created by a process of social construction rather than one reality waiting to be discovered. In the context of the present study, it implies that disability is not a given but holds varied meanings for the participants. The initial phase of the study was exploratory in nature, which was aimed at perspective building and understanding field realities. Field visits were conducted in order to find out the ground realities about inclusive education and the dynamics related to the school system. Whole school observations, including classrooms and learning centers of mainstream schools, were instrumental in bringing forth the varying contours of inclusive education. Differences in what constituted as inclusive practice emerged from this task.

Participants

As stated, the above exercise was instrumental in revealing differences in how various school systems viewed inclusion. Thus, participants were selected from different categories of schools in order to understand their perceptions about inclusive education. 30 teachers from class 9 -12 from mainstream schools of Delhi were selected of which 10 each were from state government schools, private schools and kendriya vidyalayas.

Research Tools

School observations and semi-structured interviews were the research tools used to collect data. A broad observational framework was built around themes identified on the basis of the exploratory task. This provided the scope to understand classroom realities, nature of learning, teacher-learner interaction, pedagogic strategies etc. Open-ended, conversational interviews provided the flexibility to mould the flow of the questions according to the dynamics of emerging field realities. The tools also helped to give credence to the multiple perspectives of inclusive practice.

Steps in the Research Process

The study began with exploratory field visits to mainstream and special schools, as well as other institutions and stakeholders involved in inclusive education. After a mapping of the landscape and conceptualization of tools, a preliminary trial was carried out in two schools. Tool validation was done with the help of experts in the field of inclusive education. Subsequently, a pilot try-out helped to further refine the tools. School permissions were obtained and the initial contact point was either the principal or teacher in-charge. After initial rapport building, school observations were initiated followed by a series of interviews spread over a month. Data from observations and interviews was weaved together to build a coherent narrative. Data analysis was based on a reflective reading of field notes.

Interpreting the data

This section is an attempt to understand the nuances embedded in the data collected. Teachers' responses have been analyzed thematically. However, because of many commonalities between the issues brought forth by teachers from the three categories of schools, they have been considered as a cohesive group. Significant differences, wherever relevant, have been discussed under respective themes.

Opinion about Inclusion

During my interaction with teachers, I found that many of them did not understand the term 'Inclusive education' in the beginning. When it was explained, they identified it variously as 'special education', 'education for the handicapped' and 'integration'. Majority of teachers gave a conditional approval to the system of inclusive education while some expressed favourable views for special schools. There was no significant difference among the views of teachers from the three categories of schools. Teachers who supported inclusive education gave reasons like a greater sense of equality, better learning outcomes and feelings of normalcy for the visually challenged students, in support of their view.

Along with the positive outcomes of inclusive education however, many constraints were also



highlighted which are captured in the specific narratives that follow.

“Practical problems are there. If 99 % children are fit, perfect and one child is blind, it's a problem both for teacher and student. Students with visual challenge writes in Braille but we can't check the copy. Plus what about safety? If something wrong happens, its risky.”

“System is fine but problem is doing group activities. Disabled have some deficiency; they are different; so how can we do activities with all students together?”

“Special schools were considered a better option because of subject considerations, class strength, workload of teachers and lack of teacher orientation towards the needs of students with visual challenge in regular schools.”

“Subject wise, the students with visual challenge are not getting their type of studies. How can we give time to them when we have so much pressure – completing the syllabus, checking copies, reading, maintaining discipline, exam duties, result making, etc. They get neglected.”

“Class gets disturbed. Our level is going down because of them. Teacher has to be slow because of them so we are wasting time of those who have already understood.”

“We don't even know what kind of behavior to have with them, what are the things required by them and how should we treat them emotionally.”

Curricular Issues

Curriculum transaction was initiated by most teachers in the class, usually through the medium of introductory questions followed by explanation of the main concepts. Writing questions and answers based on the lesson, was the next step. Textbooks served as the major resource material. Government school and Kendriya Vidyalaya teachers reported that some students with visual challenge brought Braille books to school and read along with other students, while a few students simply listened in the class and preferred to read or listen to books at home, citing excessive weight of the books as the reason for not getting them to school.

Many students in private schools used computers with talking software for reading textbook material which had been previously uploaded. As far as written material is concerned, Government school and Kendriya Vidyalaya students largely used Braille slates for accomplishing work. Students of private schools, typed class notes, assignments and other home work on the computer and submitted printouts to their teachers. Peers and parents were mentioned as a source of help in completing school work in many cases.

“I dictate questions and answers. He (student with VC) writes side by side on the laptop or his mother comes with a scanner, scans the class work and takes a hard copy. Or his classmates type for him or share their work.”

“NCERT and exercise books with questions are there which we tell students to fill up side by side. Other Braille books are given in Government schools, but Sanskrit books are not available. They (students with VC) don't write blackboard work. They listen but don't copy.”

The modifications and specific pedagogic strategies that teachers used mostly dealt with changing the seating arrangement to enable the student with visual challenge to sit in the front row, adjusting the pace, speaking out blackboard work, repeatedly asking them whether they have understood what had been taught in class, appreciating their responses and written work in class and asking peers to help.

Some teachers explained that they felt sorry for students with VC and were extremely sympathetic. In some cases, this sympathy seemed misplaced as well. Some telling narratives in this context are:

“Poor children, we should help them in everything”

“Even if their answer is not of a good standard, we give marks”

“They have to be given more marks for less work, since they don't participate much and we do not know what they are writing. They are mostly silent and not very vocal”

The teachers feel the burden of constraints which leave them with a feeling of helplessness and not being able to do justice to their profession. Lack of



time, facilities, excessive student strength and additional responsibilities given by the school are mentioned by a majority of teachers from Government schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas. These figure less often in the narrative of private school teachers although inadequacy experienced due to lack of specialized training has been commonly expressed across all categories. A math teacher from a private school narrated,

“Jaws (Job Access with Speech) and Taylor frame were new for me. I was worried about how she would keep up but she manages. I would see on her computer, tell her steps and she would calculate on the Taylor frame to find the answer.”

“Want to do so much but can't do, therefore personally don't feel happy. I think, I should have done more for her (student with VC) but if make her sit in P.T (Physical Training) or library period, I am taking away from that activity. I don't know how to manage.”

“Blind students should be able to present material to us and we should be able to give them notes. But we don't know Braille. We need resource rooms and training in Braille.”

Modifications done in evaluation activities for students with VC were usually based on converting them to oral format. For instance, in science, they were given group projects related to current topics and the student with VC was chosen to make the presentation. Projects in social studies were on tourist spots, historical monuments, creative writing, extempore speech etc. For the latter, while other students were asked to present extempore, the student with VC was given a few topics beforehand, which she had to prepare and present any one of them.

For tests, some teachers from Government schools gave them extra time during the test and conducted it orally, while the rest of the class was writing. Most teachers from private schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas took tests with the help of writers. However, finding suitable writers has been quoted as a problem by teachers.

Literary, Cultural and Sports Activities

In Kendriya Vidyalayas and private schools, activities have been given a space in the time table

whereas in some Government schools, they are linked to upcoming 'competitions' and celebrations of important days. Participation in music is a universal trend, across schools. This is supported by the notion of innate talent in the areas of vocal and instrumental music.

A feature of government schools was the lack of choice in the selection of activities. They were pre-decided for the students. Each section was assigned activities like candle making, poem recitation, debates, home science tasks and drawing. As a result, teachers felt that students were not able to connect with these activities.

Some teachers also voiced that the participation of VC students was less, which was attributed to lack of modified sports equipment and feasibility issues. Some schools had modified equipment like tactile chess boards and sound balls.

Discussion

Varied shades of understanding have emerged from the responses of the teachers. Confusion exists not only at the level of terminology, but also about a deeper philosophical level which is concerned with the meaning and purposes of inclusive education. Users of contemporary terminology were in a minority. References to 'handicapped' and 'special' children were a reflection of the larger societal perceptions about students with VC. In some cases, inclusion and integration were seen as synonymous and 'learning centers' where the students spent a major part of the day were also referred to as inclusive settings. This lack of clarity was also evident in government circulars where these terms have been used interchangeably at times. There is positivity about the ideational basis of inclusive education in terms of equality, human rights, negotiation with society, increased educational and psychological benefits for students with VC as well as their peers. This has been expressed in terms of better learning, sensitization towards 'others' needs, self-esteem, confidence and independence values.

However, many 'ifs' and 'buts' cropped up at the practical level of inclusive education. The experiences shared referred to large number of students in classes, lack of training in special needs



education manifesting in not being able to check assignments and tests written in Braille, not knowing how to address the emotional needs of students with VC etc.

The 'charity' model was also evident in the interviews with teachers. Many of them looked at issues in a culturally and socially defined fashion. 'Bechara' (Poor thing) is a frequently used word. Many instances of excessive sympathy were evidenced. 'Helping them' was a key phrase used by most teachers while referring to students with VC. The 'normal' versus 'handicapped' dichotomy was also prominent with both categories of students being constantly compared. Thus, we see the importance of teachers' attitudes in students' quest for a non-stigmatized existence. At times, a few teachers used words like 'problem', 'they have their schools' to denote the sense of burden that students with VC pose for them. The extent of 'handicap' was seen as an important deciding factor for inclusive education.

Private schools made greater use of available technology whereas Braille books were the standard option in Government schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas. Techniques for fostering an interactive pedagogic climate were rarely evident. Not many adaptations in the regular classroom routine were seen, in the context of the visually challenged. Subject teachers' narratives reflected a journey from apprehension to involvement. Their first contact with the students was characterized by doubts about pedagogic strategies to be used, time requirements, behavior to be employed, evaluation procedures, etc. Sustained contact enabled them to learn on the job and gradually devise minor variations in their teaching routine. Majority of them felt a sense of helplessness at not being able to do justice to students with VC.

Evaluation procedures centered around oral recitation of projects, question and answers along with class tests. Availability of writers was a common challenge across schools, perhaps indicating the need for a dedicated pool of writers to be recruited in the scenario of dwindling numbers of 'volunteers'. Alternatively, technological adaptations available for students

with VC, can be applied to ensure their self-reliance.

Literary, cultural and sports activities were dominated by participation in musical events. Directorate of education organizes programmes to spread awareness about the variety of skills of disabled children, for instance, arranging for children to see International Abilympics competitions. (Nodal Officer's overview of IEDC implementation). In spite of these efforts, clearly our notions of acceptable activities for students with VC are straitjacketed and limiting in nature. There are many alternatives to music, which can be explored in a feasible manner but most students with VC continue to be assigned music for school activities.

The study brings forth the need for educating teachers in the areas of curricular adaptations for students with VC in terms of conceptual development and skills for daily living, orientation, mobility and communication. Familiarity with tactile aids and other specialized equipment is required for meaningful student-teacher interaction. Conveying positive feelings, an empathetic attitude and being sensitive about the language used in referring to students with VC is essential for developing self esteem. Orientation and sensitization of peers by the teacher helps to create opportunities for interaction. Collaboration between various stakeholders ensures that the student perceives her parents, subject teachers and special educators working together for an enriching educational experience. Policy makers need to listen to teachers and envisage them as partners in framing and implementing policies. Thus, we find that the positive outlook of stakeholders is tempered by many challenges which still exist. These need to be addressed meaningfully if inclusive education is to become a reality in its true sense.

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