

# Barriers to Access and Success: Is Inclusive Education an Answer?

By

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## **Introduction:**

The principle of basic education as a human right has been accepted internationally. However, the experience in many developing countries shows that a large number of children are not able to complete minimum number of school years. They face variety of barriers before coming to school and even within the school. Does 'inclusive education' offer a solution? The paper has attempted a response by analyzing the origin, concept and practices of inclusive education, as also the nature of barriers children, particularly those at risk and from the disadvantaged sections have to confront when they want to access school education.

## **Origin of inclusive education:**

The 'Salamanca Statement' adopted at the 'World Conference on Special Educational Needs: Access and Quality' called upon all governments and urged them to:

Adopt as a matter of law or policy the principles of *inclusive education*, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise (UNESCO, 1994, Statement, p. ix).

There are two distinct perspectives on inclusive education. First, emerging largely from the developed countries, and the second, owing to the felt need and circumstances prevailing in the developing world. In richer developed countries, education is largely

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inclusive of girls, the disadvantaged and the ethnic groups. Children with disabilities-physical and mental and learning difficulties, earlier getting education in separate special schools, are now being recommended to regular schools with inclusive orientation. Therefore, the discourse on inclusive education in developed countries mostly centers on the extension of special education, or at most a reform in special education. The underlying approach in this perspective has been that children's disabilities are due to medical factors that need to be rectified in order to fit them in the organized school, its curriculum and pedagogy.

However, plethora of literature has emerged recently, which look at the inclusive education from educational reforms perspectives. Schools should respond to diverse needs of *all* children and fit themselves in children's learning styles and needs, and not the other way. Ferguson (1996), Udavi-Solner (1996), Thomas et al (1998), Ainscow (1999) and Mittler (2000) have extensively dealt on the school reforms perspectives to develop the concept and practices of inclusive education. Continuing with this approach, Sebba and Ainscow (1996) have offered a definition of inclusion:

Inclusion describes the process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering its curricular organization and provision. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces the need to exclude pupils (p.9).

The presumption in this definition is that most students from the local community would 'wish to attend' the neighborhood regular schools. Those who do not may be going either to special schools or the public (private) boarding schools. In the UK, on an average seven percent pupil attend private schools.

### **Inclusion in developing countries:**

The approach has to be different in respect of the developing countries where large proportion of children is still out of school. Those who get enrolled are unable to complete minimum prescribed number of school years. The 1994 UNESCO World Conference also realized this situation when it argued that a school should,

...accommodate *all children* regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized area and groups. (UNESCO, 1994, Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p.6)

These inclusive schools,

... must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. (UNESCO, 1994, Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p.11-12)

### **Special Educational Needs:**

From the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and the Framework of Action, there does not appear any ambiguity in regard to approach and perspectives on inclusive education. The confusion presumably has arisen from the terminology *special needs education* used for the title of the world conference, leading to the Framework for Action 'on principles, policy and practice in *special needs education*.' A similar term and the concept, to be specific, 'special educational needs' or the SEN was introduced by the Warnock

Committee in 1978 in the UK, which later on got defined in the 1981 Education Act as follows:

A child has 'special educational needs' if he/she has a learning difficulty, which calls for special educational provision to be made for him/her. A child had learning difficulty if he/she:

- (a) has significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age;
- (b) has a disability which either prevents or hinders the child from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local authority. (See Jha, 2002, p.64).

The SEN concept was a progress on educating children with disabilities in the UK earlier done mostly in separate special schools as a matter of policy. Warnock abolished the eleven categories of children at that time, but increased the proportion of children needing special educational treatment from two percent to twenty percent. It considered variety of factors that might contribute to learning difficulties but was 'forbidden to count social deprivation as in any way contributing to educational needs' (Clough and Corbett, 2000, p.4). In developing countries, the aspect of social and economic deprivation cannot be ignored, and taking that into account, the SEN children in these countries might constitute even a majority! The concept of SEN and identification of children with special educational needs under the statutory 'code of practice' has been critiqued by several commentators and educationists in Britain (Tomlinson, 1982; Galloway et al., 1994; Vlachou, 1997; Booth et al. 1998; Mitler, 2000).

Mitller (2000) sees the identification of children with special educational needs as labeling and discriminatory. Ainscow sees the very concept of 'special educational needs' as 'barriers' to inclusion. He says:

I think the concept of special educational needs, particularly as it is seen in this country, becomes another barrier. I don't think it has a productive contribution to make to the inclusive education agenda. If anything, it is one of the barriers to moving forward (Clough and Corbett, 2000).

The Salamanca Framework of Action did refer to a move from the term 'special educational needs' to inclusive education, when it said,

In the context of this Framework, the term 'special educational needs' refers to all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties...There is an emerging consensus that children and youth with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children. This has led to the concept of the inclusive school. (UNESCO, 1994, Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p.6)

However, without significant changes in the policies and curricular arrangements in the schools including in the West, the ultimate objectives of inclusive education cannot be achieved. Prof Sally Tomlinson has observed in the following words,

There is considerable anxiety that despite rhetoric of inclusive education, education policies in developed countries continue to ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are often excluded from forms of education regarded as most valuable, and from gaining qualifications that can be exchanged for good employment, income and security. There is, in particular, a growing awareness that creating competitive markets in education, with schools competing for the most desirable pupils and

resources, is incompatible with inclusive education (Foreword by Sally Tomlinson in Jha, 2002).

The World Conference on Special Needs Education noted the need for reforms in school education, in both the developing as well as in the developed countries:

Special Needs Education – an issue of equal concern to countries of the North and of the South – cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of ordinary schools. (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii-iv)

### **Barriers in schools:**

There are walls between schools and children before they get enrolled, they face walls with curriculum inside the classrooms and finally ‘they face more walls when they have to take examinations which determine how successful they will be in life’ (Jha, 2002)!

On walls and barriers confronting the school system today, it is further observed:

Removing barriers and bringing *all* children together in school irrespective of their physical and mental abilities, or social and economic status, and securing their participation in learning activities leads to the initiation of the process of inclusive education. Once walls within schools are broken, schools move out of their boundaries, end isolation and reach out to the communities. The distance between formal schools, non-formal schools, special schools and open schools will be eliminated (Jha, 2002, p.15-16).

The most school systems are confronting two types of barriers, external and internal. Children face external barriers before coming to and getting enrolled in schools. The nature of such barriers could be physical location of schools, social stigmatization or

economic conditions of children. Sometimes non-availability of school or its location in area that cannot be accessed becomes the major barrier for children to get education. Children with disabilities face barriers if the building has not been constructed with their mobility needs in mind.

Schools offer variety of reasons, particularly in countries, which do not have strong neighborhood school policy, for rejecting students' admissions. It could be elimination during the selection test or on the ground that the school does not have facilities particularly for children with disabilities or because parents are not able to pay high fees, particularly in case of private schools. These barriers can be taken care of by strong public policy interventions. Countries have enacted laws, which call for education of children with disabilities in regular schools as far as possible. Special schools exist for the severely disabled only. Developed countries are able to organize neighborhood or comprehensive school concept where most children go to publicly funded local schools in the neighborhood. Such equity in regard to the access may not be visible in developing countries. The common school system policy is yet to be extended to private schools in India, which enroll 9 percent of secondary students, while 46 percent of the secondary enrolment is in private aided schools, followed by 45 percent in government schools. These different sets of schools offer differential levels of facilities and support thus creating inequities not only in access but also in success. Those able to access private schools have higher possibility of success as compared to those who have no choice but to go to government schools.

Children face barriers within schools and classrooms owing to organization of curriculum and teaching methodologies. At times, they are assessed and 'identified' and thereafter isolated within schools, or even classrooms, to receive discriminatory curriculum. In England, under the existing policy more than 20 percent children are being identified and labeled as 'special educational needs' with or without 'statements'. Stated children more than often are sent out of schools. Curriculum in many developing countries is not child friendly or relevant to the needs of children. It is content based and children learn by rote and memorization. Linguistics and logical-mathematical areas of learning are overemphasized, while other areas of intelligence remains unexplored. Realization is coming in many countries, such as in the economically forward countries of East Asia, that present system of school and curricular organization may not be able to cope with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A recent Time magazine survey of East Asian schools reports on 'Japan completing its radical (educational) restructuring, abolishing Saturday classes, encouraging volunteerism and allowing schools to experiment with different curricula; Taiwan scrapping its university entrance exam system in favor of a more holistic approach that considers grades, essays and extracurricular activities, and South Korea picking up to a third of incoming college students not for their test scores but for their unique talents' (Beech, 2002). Elliot (2002) reports on changes being attempted in American schools where students 'learn social skills and group work in environment that celebrates diversity.'

Examination scores judge the success in the present model of schooling. Such definition of success is bound to be a barrier by itself. In an scenario prevailing in India,

Examinations also drive out many children, particularly the rural, the disadvantaged and the disabled, out of the school. It is a great filtering

mechanism. It suits the system, since only a select few students, largely from the urban middle class, get high scores, thanks to the system of tuitions and coaching, in order to get admission into higher academic institutions, which have limited seats (Jha, 2002).

**Inclusion: a solution to barriers and success?**

Inclusive schools are designed with a vision and principle that believe in the culture of rights, social justice and equity. It believes that all children are not the same, and accepts diversity as strength rather than a problem. It believes in certain basic pedagogy that children learn in different ways, and relates success more with the learning of life and social skills than scoring high marks in exams. The admission policy of such schools would accept children from a diverse community rather than reject on the ground of admission test scores or other physical, social and economic factors.

Inclusive schools follow flexible curricula that would respond to the diverse needs of children. Child-centered pedagogy and application of Gardner's (1993) Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory are other major departure from the traditional schools that inclusive schools would follow. The UNESCO Framework has again highlighted the need of child-centered pedagogy for addressing the educational needs of the disadvantaged and the disabled:

The challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child –centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities. The merit of such schools is not that they are capable of providing *quality education to all* children; their establishment is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating welcoming communities and in developing an inclusive society. (UNESCO, 1994, Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p.6. *emphasis by me*)

Traditional schools offer scope for the use of only two types of intelligences-linguistic and logical-mathematical. This approach itself creates learning barriers for a large number of children particularly those belonging to the first generation learners, the disadvantaged and the disabled, for Gardner (1993) has identified seven types of intelligences: linguistic or verbal, logical-mathematical, spatial or visual, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal and intra-personal. Schools encouraging the identification and application of these intelligences would be able to remove unseen and internal barriers that children face in traditional schools.

Inclusive schools use variety of innovative practices to get children involved and participating in learning processes. Some of the inclusion strategies are listed as under (Jha, 2002,p.140)

- Whole class inclusive teaching
- Group/cooperative/collaborative learning
- Peer tutoring/child-to-child learning
- Activity based learning
- Team approach/problem solving
- Equity in assessment/examinations

Inclusive education and its evolution in school system as a process for removing barriers to access and success is a growing phenomenon. The strategies suggested above have been tried out in many schools across the countries and have also conceptual and pedagogical backing. However, it is yet to be shaped into a reform movement or as a replacement of the traditional school system.

### **Quality with Equity:**

There is one more dimension to the inclusion concept. It addresses the issue of quality in consonance with equity. In traditional style of schooling quality and excellence are divorced from equity. The institution of the school as a public system for mass education has its origin in the industrial era. It grew on the production line factory model in a period when democracy was yet to flower fully; elitism, hierarchy and even feudalism guided the social and economic fabrics of the society and its institutions. School was not an exception. It borrowed not only vocabularies from the industries, such as ‘products’, ‘performance’, ‘standard’, ‘test’ etc., but also its ethos. Admittedly, now we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in the information age. Hence, it calls for a re-look at the institution of school. Skrtic (1991), Lipsky and Gartner (1999) and Llyod (2000) have questioned the ‘adequacy, relevance and appropriateness’ of the public education system that was shaped and influenced by the needs of the industrial era. The post-industrial work place of rapid technological change and development require more of collaborative, problem solving and teamwork skills. Besides, authors have established a linkage between collaboration, equity and excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. ‘Collaboration means learning collaboratively with and from persons with varying interests, abilities, skills and cultural perspectives’ (Skrtic, 1991). Equity, therefore, becomes pre-condition for the postindustrial era schools. The author further observes,

The successful schools in the postindustrial era will be ones that achieve excellence and equity simultaneously – indeed one that recognizes equity as the way to excellence (ibid, p.233).

**Open education:**

Open education is characterized by the removal of 'restrictions, exclusions and privileges' (Richardson, 2000). It provides an alternative curricular route to students who are not able to cope with the rigid curriculum and fixed timeframe of the traditional school system. To many students and parents, however, it is regarded as a secondary choice, considered after they have not been able to access or secure 'success' in the existing regular school system. It is considered as a non-contact educational delivery system, though its interactive learning materials are more learner friendly than the textbooks as the sole means of learning in many schools. The growth of information and communication technology in recent years and its application in education is reducing the distance between open education system and 'not-open' system. Children in regular schools are accessing information with the help of modern educational technology and the Internet. They are becoming active partners in knowledge production, as they would do in the open system. Teachers are changing their role and are becoming facilitators. Schools are becoming learning places for dialogues and exchanges.

Inclusive education in its philosophy as also in practice is closer to the open education system. In India's 'national open school', students have demolished the myth that 'open school' must correspond to the mode of 'distance education', whereby students should not assemble daily at a place and teachers should not be around to help them. Many children with disabilities in special schools as also non-disabled students in some regular schools are opting for open school curriculum in preference to the traditional school boards' curricula. Such open schools are removing barriers to access for a cross section

of students and are assuring success that might have been denied by the traditional school system.

**Case examples:**

Two schools in India have been studied closely as examples. They have addressed the issues of equity and quality simultaneously and are close to the concept of inclusive schooling, though they remain within the confines of the school boards.

Loreto Day School, Sealdah (Kolkata) is affiliated with the West Bengal State School Board, but is not like many other private or partially aided schools in the country. In 1979, it had 90 poor and non-fee paying students out of a total of 790 on its roll. In 1998, the school roll had 1400 students, and 700 were non-fee paying. These students are subsidized by the fee-paying students, sponsors and donors and by the West Bengal government for the dearness allowance as they give to other registered private schools. This increase in percentage of non-fee paying students is not just a numerical or mechanical exercise aimed to open access to these students by an established reputed school. It flows from a vision and value system that school has created for itself. Its other programmes include the 'Rainbow School'- a school-within-a-school for street children, which is not a tag- on afternoon programme to take care of equity, but is a structured and integral programme of curriculum development and child-to-child teaching and learning. The street children are individually tutored by 'regular' pupils from class V to X as a part of their work experience time slot. Many 'rainbow children' succeed in getting enrolled in regular schools, and others have found secure jobs in organized or unorganized professions. The school runs many other programmes and activities to reach out to the community.

Loreto challenges a fixed view of school and its structure by seeking to live out a set of values which continually challenges parents, teachers and pupils of the school to build an outward looking *community*, to be *flexible*, and to live in *simplicity*...flexibility places utmost value on people...simplicity places the resources at Loreto's disposal in the broader context ...it therefore stands against acquisitiveness, consumerism and the trappings of modern life in favor of valuing people and relationships (Jessop, 1998).

The school has also maintained the conventional academic performance by its students, 50% scoring first class annually at XII class public exam conducted by the school board. Loreto has succeeded in breaking the conventional mindset that creates barriers to access by poor students as also the very concept of quality and success. 'There are lessons for all schools, worldwide, rich and poor, in the boundary breaking strategies which Loreto has adopted to maximize its resources'. (Source: Jessop, 1998).

There are many schools in Kolkata and other cities in India which bring better off children in face to face with children from weaker sections, though not to the extent and in the manner Loreto does. The point being made is that breaking the barriers to access may not be an isolated strategy but could be made a systemic issue to bring in inclusion, equity and redefined quality as the philosophy and vision of the educational institutions.

St. Mary's school in New Delhi got into inclusion mode with the admission of Komal Ghosh, a student with cerebral palsy of severe nature, who was earlier in a special school. 'Komal's presence helped school become more humane', says principal Annie Koshy. Since then school has opened its gate to other type of children with disabilities, orphans and poor students. The priority in admission is given to neighborhood students and all

children learn together in the same classroom. The school's teachers evolve variety of teaching methodologies to actively involve children in learning activities. The school has not kept high score by their students in the central board exam as its main motto. Teachers meet frequently to share their experiences in a problem-solving mode and as a team for taking care of the learning needs of all children. In addition the school has also outreach programmes whereby it helps children and adults from underprivileged groups in literacy and skill building.

The two examples suggest adoption of the inclusion processes by the schools in a natural way, which have helped them in breaking barriers that are created by rigid policy and structures in most schools.

As a matter of policy the Indian law requires that children with disabilities be educated in regular schools as far as possible. Many schools, including some private schools, are following this policy by giving admission to these children. But, in the absence of a vision and orientation, children get isolated and many times they are segregated in separate units or even if in the same class they do not feel included. The concept inclusion, though initiated in the background of education of children with disabilities and special needs, goes beyond special school, particularly when one thinks of children in developing countries. It takes into its fold the vulnerable and the children at risk, for whom access is not just a question of physical availability of space in schools and services of teachers and success does not mean only passing public examinations.

**Conclusion:**

Barriers to access and success can be viewed in physical as well as structural sense. But more than that, it is the curriculum, the pedagogy, the examination and the school's approach, which create barriers. Unless these unseen barriers are taken care of, access to all children and an assurance of success to all would remain a far cry. The inclusive education movement, combined with technological development and a new approach to open schooling has come at this crucial juncture. Countries and school systems choosing a holistic approach to access and success are more likely to succeed in reaching education for all.

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