



A qualitative study based on inclusive education for children with disabilities in private schools in Kolkata

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Abstract

Inclusive Education (IE) is a new approach towards educating the children with disability and learning difficulties with that of normal ones within the same roof. It brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students. It is one of the most effective ways in which to promote an inclusive and tolerant society. It is known that 73 million children of primary school age were out of school in 2010, down from a high of over 110 million out-of-school children in the mid-1990s, according to new estimates by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 'Inclusive education' policy has been introduced in India, however the concept is in its infancy. This qualitative study analyses the case of children with disabilities studying in private inclusive schools of Kolkata. It discusses the development of self concept, elucidates the benefits and challenges of children with disabilities in inclusive education. We then suggest recommendations for improvements in implementing inclusive education in India.

Keywords: children with disabilities, inclusive education, self concept, developing countries, Kolkata

Introduction

There have been efforts internationally to include children with disabilities in the educational mainstream. Geoff Lindsay (2007:1) suggests that 'inclusive education/mainstreaming is the key policy objective for education of children and young people with disabilities'. Inclusive education entails 'increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools' (Booth and Ainscow, 1998:2). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education paved the way for inclusive education. It upheld the aim of 'education for all' by suggesting some foundational changes in programmes and policies of nations. The Salamanca Statement maintains that 'inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and the enjoyment and exercise of human rights' (quoted in CSIE 1997). Thus we see inclusive education as largely emanating from the human rights perspective which upholds that variations in human characteristics associated with disability, whether in cognitive, sensory, or motor ability, as inherent to the human condition and such conditions do not limit human potential (Rioux and Carbet 2003). The idea of children having rights independently of the adults around them is a relatively new concept of the past century and a common theme in early legislation was that children were seen as passive recipients, to be 'seen but not heard' (Munro 2001). The adoption of Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) in 1989 and the World Summit for Children in 1990 were promising enactments and it appeared that rights of children were seriously being considered by the governments and international community (International Save the Children Alliance 2001). In the context of the right to education for

children with disabilities as laid out in CRC and more illustriously in UNCPRD, this research seeks to understand the experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in Kolkata, India.

Few measures for implementing Inclusive Education

Inclusive education helps the disabled child to develop a sense of pride in their work because they actually fill like they accomplished something. We know that Albert Einstein was learning disabled but still managed to become the greatest mind of the 20th century. Educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is considered one of the better ways to provide education to the population in India (Shah, 2005, Shah *et al.*, 2014) [7]. The Government of India needs to bridge the gaps in their education system to build a strong system of inclusive education in the country. So, there are following measures for better implementation of Inclusive Education in India.

The Right to Education (RTE) must apply to all citizens of India. State and central Governments as well as all the other social actors should recognize the importance of a broadened concept of inclusive education that addresses the diverse needs of all learners.

1. A policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout Indian education system (NCF, 2005). Schools need to become centers that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially the differently abled children from marginalized sections, and children in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education. A school-based support team should develop strategies for the whole school to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs. This team should also be a resource for

- teachers experiencing problems in their classrooms.
- The school has the primary responsibility for helping children learn alongside their typically developing peers. An inclusive school must enable education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children, particularly those who face the greatest barriers to achieving their right to education.
 - Parents have a right to be involved in all decision-making concerning their child. They should be seen as partners in the education process. Where there is such co-operation, parents have been found to be very important resources for the teachers and the schools.
 - Bringing special children into mainstream requires adjustments that schools need to make in advance. Transport facilities should be altered, so that these children can move around with relative ease. Architecturally, there should be ramps and wheelchair access constructed in service areas such as toilets.

Conceptual Framework

There are a few concepts which require definition before we set out to discuss the conceptual framework; ‘disability’, ‘inclusive education’ and ‘self concept’. We have derived our understanding from the theoretical review and we have utilised the same for this research.

For defining the major concept governing the research, which is ‘inclusive education’, we would first have to unravel the context. Singal (2007) contends that in India inclusive education is understood and practiced differently from the western world. In fact there is “a tendency to be ‘politically correct’ by taking on current trends in the west without a real or common understanding of their meaning, resulting in dilution of service quality” (Kalyanpur 2008 quoted in Singal 2007). Ideally, “inclusive education means attending the age appropriate class of the child’s local school, with individually tailored support” (UNICEF 2007). This research considered an ‘inclusive school’ as one where the children with disabilities studied alongside their non-disabled peers with some support mechanisms for continuing their education in that school.

Research Objectives

This research purposes to:

- Examine the factors which may influence development of self concept in children with disabilities in inclusive settings.
- Examine the experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive schools.
- Suggest strategies to enhance the experience of children with disabilities in inclusive schools.

Thus we have analysed the experiences of children in inclusive settings and their perceptions about self. The descriptions of children with disabilities related to experiences in inclusive schools which were supportive as well as those which comprised a challenge were analysed.

Based on these analyses, we suggest some recommendations for furthering inclusive education for children with disabilities in India.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on interviews of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in Kolkata. We have described and analyzed the experiences of children with disabilities studying in inclusive classrooms.

Methods

This qualitative study is based on discussions with children with disabilities in private inclusive schools in Kolkata, India. We had employed the case study method as it allows an intensive study (Shepard 2003) within its real-life context of children with disabilities. It provides an in-depth and systematic way of looking at events and helps in gaining a sharpened understanding of causality and provides a sound base for extensive exploration in future research (Bent 2006). A total of five in-depth interviews were conducted from seven inclusive schools in Kolkata. The general characteristics of the children are presented in Table 2. The discussions related to children’s perceptions and experiences regarding themselves and their placement in regular educational settings were noted down.

The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. Many researchers have subscribed to audio-taping of interviews in order to avoid bias (Borg & Gall 1989; Seale & Silverman 1997). Borg and Gall (1989) suggested that it could prevent unconscious selection of text favouring the bias of the researcher. In this research it particularly helped as the interview span with children lasted more than an hour in each case and the questions related to the research were interspersed with a lot of other information sharing. Children often lost interest if the researcher resorted to note-taking.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Research Respondents

Name*	Sex	Age	Grade	Impairment
Hari	Female	7	II	Language and Communication disorder
Ram	Female	9	IV	Learning Disability
Joli	Male	10	IV	Asperger's Syndrome
Rabi	Male	10	IV	Slow learner
Deka	Male	11	V	Spina Bifida

*the names of all children have been changed to maintain anonymity.

The interviews were conducted from July to December 2016. The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide that contained the list of issues and probes were included wherever considered essential. The questions intended to gain an understanding of how these students viewed their physical, social and psychological self, their abilities, class placement, the legitimacy of inclusive education, and the extent to which they regarded themselves as part of the wide school and community culture and felt accepted by their classmates, friends and teachers. Before each interview, the purpose of the study was explained to the prospective participants, it was also made clear that there would be no consequences to their schooling or in any other way by not participating, that there was no compulsion to participate and accordingly consent was obtained from both the children and their parents before conducting the interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and Hindi depending on the understanding of the respondents. The

interviews conducted in Hindi were later translated. This study focuses on two key areas; the child's understanding of self as well as their comprehensive experience of inclusive environment, both of which govern their participation in inclusive schools and the development of their individuality.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted in seven inclusive private schools. A monthly fee was required to be paid and additional costs were incurred for subsidiary expenses on uniforms, books, school activities and transport. They were all mainstream schools with a Resource unit of children with disability which provided at least one Resource teacher within campus to assist the children with disabilities. The schools were implementing the "Resource Room Model". Smith *et al.* (1993) define 'resource room model' as one where the children with disabilities attend resource room for special assistance in deficit areas and spend the rest of the day in general classrooms with their non-disabled peers.

As there was no official list of inclusive schools, the seven schools were chosen based on information from key informants and practitioners/ NGO's. Those inclusive schools which had at least five children with disabilities on roll were selected for this study. The idea behind this inclusion criterion was that it would enable us to get at least one student we could interview. It also made it possible to find children with different types of disability. For instance a school with one child with a locomotor disability would only be dealing with the mobility issues and may/may not have other resources like a resource room or therapy room etc. Another assumption which guided this was that the number of children with disabilities would be scattered in different grades bringing to light issues related to particular classrooms like variation in curriculum, teaching strategies etc. Additional information pertaining to the child's background information, reports/feedback related to performance, challenges and achievements was secured from interviews with principals of the seven schools, twenty regular teachers, twelve resource teachers. The concerns raised with the Principals included; the basic requirements for an inclusive school, how do the admissions criteria reflect the needs, attributes and diversity of potential students, in what way the school is different from other schools, what were the support systems available for children with disabilities etc. Interviews with fifteen non-disabled peers, with appropriate consent, provided data related to interpersonal interactions.

Limitations

- A major limitation is the lack of availability of relevant literature for Indian context as very few empirical studies have been undertaken in India.
- Obtaining permission from parents and children for interviews was not easy. The refusal rate was 66%; (40% rejecting the request and 26% non response) indicating the unwillingness of the parents to participate in the research. We may have lost valuable information and reasons for non-participation in the research.
- Finding appropriate times for conducting the interviews was extremely difficult. The interviews and discussions

had to happen within the available time and without causing any disturbance to the normal school proceedings.

Results and Discussion

We have examined the supportive factors for children with disabilities studying in inclusive schools. We have also analysed data pertaining to self concept of children with disabilities in inclusive school settings.

Support

There were several supporting factors which helped the child with disabilities to continue in a regular school. The school has the primary responsibility for helping children learn alongside their typically developing peers. An inclusive school must enable education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children, particularly those who face the greatest barriers to achieving their right to education (see also Save the Children 2006) Table 3 enlists the facilities provided by these schools to include children with disabilities. All children included in the study had spent at least two years in the school which suggest that the schools were responsive to their needs and is providing facilities to ensure continuity. Almost all children need remedial teaching and the schools have made a provision of a resource room.

Table 2: Efforts of schools to include children with disabilities

Child	Impairment	No of Years spent in inclusive School	Facilities provided at School
HARI	Language and Communication disorder	4	Regular remedial classes with the resource teacher
RAM	Learning Disability	3	Remedial classes with the resource teacher thrice a Week
JOLI	Asperger's Syndrome	5	Counseling sessions for child and parents
RABI	Slow learner	2	Remedial classes with the resource teacher, exemption from one language
DEKA	Spina Bifida	2	Remedial classes with the resource teacher, Provision of Writer, occasional counseling sessions

Challenges

There could be many barriers for educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms. It is evident from the experiences of children with disabilities and their families, in an inclusive school environment. These barriers could emanate from scarcity of resources, negative attitudes of teachers, non-disabled peers and their parents. The peers in school, being the closest on par, play an important role in the lives of the children with disabilities. There is general support for the hypothesis that children who

are not accepted by peers are generally at risk for difficulties later in life (Ochoa & Olivarez Jr., 1995). Acceptance by peers provides a much greater challenge for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are often an easy target for being teased and bullied by their non-disabled peers as reported by children interviewed in this study (see also Nabuzoka and Smith 1993; Dawkins 1996) [5]. Recent research findings suggest that vulnerability to bullying cuts across all types of disability (Mishna 2003; Smith and Tippett 2006).

Recommendations

In our study we observed that all schools except one had one resource teacher for all children with special needs in the school (ranging between 20-25 children). This meant that the proportion of resource teacher to student was very low in most of the schools. A similar finding has also been reported by Sreekumari (2003), that the number of children with disabilities under one resource teacher is high which acts as a barrier. For the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme the ratio of resource teacher to student has been decreased to 1:6 (Mukhopadhyay and Prakash 2004). It is important to have resource teachers in the school to be proportionate with the needs of the children with disabilities in order to provide adequate support. Sometimes, children with disabilities display some needs which may require a constant collaborative effort of the regular and resource teacher in the classroom, for instance, a child with an acute hyperactivity disorder may require the presence of a resource teacher in the classroom. This would only be possible if there are enough resource teachers to share the workload.

The recommended changes might prove beneficial for children with disabilities who have taken on the challenge of studying in inclusive schools as well as being rewarding to the schools which have adopted inclusive education.

Conclusion

Our study of the experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in India aimed to consider certain aspects of inclusive schooling and suggest some improvements which could be beneficial for children with disabilities and strengthen the process of inclusion. As the concept of inclusive education is simultaneously being understood and practiced, the voices of primary stakeholders are indeed imperative. These lived experiences must inform and guide the policy as we strive to make these schools 'inclusive' in a real sense of the term.

Children with disabilities studying in inclusive schools have unique experiences where they interact constantly with their non-disabled peers. It affects the development of their self concept in areas related to academics, physical self, active self and social self. This paper elucidates the self perceptions of children in these areas which to a large extent determine their adjustability in an inclusive school setting. The inclusion process is facilitated through support received from school, resource teachers, and parents particularly mothers. Our research findings highlight specific challenges faced by children with disabilities in inclusive schools in terms of peer relationships and attitudes of regular teachers.

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