



INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM AND SOCIAL DIVERSITY: MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Today, many children, across the country come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities; ethnic and religious minorities, economically weaker sections (EWS), migrant labourers, nomadic and de-notified tribes, urban poor, children with special needs (CWSN) and so on. Although children of these communities are enrolled in school, they face the danger of dropping out. Many of them live in extremely vulnerable socio-economic conditions and face a serious threat to their universal rights, such as a school education. From a learner's point of view, TE, 2009 provides a legal framework to make school admission, attendance and completion compulsory. It is now a widely recognized fact that glaring achievement gaps exist between the children of marginalized and non-marginalized communities (GOI, 2009). In fact, in recent decades, various studies, reports and documents have revealed that in the classroom, curriculum delivery and pedagogy in contemporary mainstream government schools in India, children—especially those belonging to the marginalized communities—are subjected to various forms of discrimination and humiliation which severely affects their self-respect and self-confidence. Children have narrated painful stories of their experiences in the classroom and shown their resentment to this, as well as towards the teachers (Probe Report, 1999; Nambissan, 2001; Govinda, 2002). Some children have undergone violent experiences inflicted by teachers as well as their classmates from dominant castes. A study of schools in Uttar Pradesh by Dreze and Gazdar (1996) reported that teachers refused to touch SC children. They were subjected to verbal abuse and physical punishment by teachers, and were frequently beaten by their upper-caste classmates. Recognizing the complex of issues regarding teacher based practices the RTE Act, 2009 makes it talk about the pedagogic factors that prevent learners, especially those belonging to disadvantaged social backgrounds, from a comprehensive and continuous elementary education, in the context of ensuring quality education for all. NCF 2005 also attempted to address the issue of “child-friendly” teaching-learning. NCF 2005 makes a series of observations and suggestions about pedagogy, curriculum, teaching-learning material, and classroom and school environments.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION:

Today the increasing number of learners from diverse backgrounds entering elementary classrooms has reinforced the importance of making schools more inclusive. With a greater variation in the talents, and social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds of the learners, the elementary classroom in India faces a challenge to use this diversity constructively in order to democratize the teaching-learning processes and practices, and achieve the larger goals of social justice.

In this context the agenda of “inclusive education” has gained importance. There has been a further impetus with the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The implementation of this Act will be considered successful only if it addresses the issue of making the children of marginalized communities “visible” within the four walls of the classroom. Many of these children, across the country come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) Communities, ethnic and religious minorities, economically weaker sections (EWS), migrant labourers, nomadic and de-notified tribes, urban poor, children with special needs (CWSN) and so on. Although children of these communities are enrolled in school, they face the danger of dropping out.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 also attempted to address the issue of “child-friendly” teaching-learning. NCF, 2005 also notes the fact that learning has become a burden, causing immense stress to children and their parents, which are evidenced by the deep distortion in educational aims and quality. NCF 2005 makes a series of observations and suggestions about pedagogy, curriculum, teaching-learning material, and classroom and school environments.

Persisting Myths

The persistence of discriminatory practices by teachers, educators, school authorities and all of us in general about underachieving learners' socio cultural identities and abilities are based on a number of problematic assumptions. These are often deeply rooted and shaped by varied socio cultural contexts which have remained largely unspoken but understood by those who believe in diverse societal norms.

• Children Are Children After All ... They Are the Same

No. Children have multiple and diverse identities. But why do children look similar? Imagine children at school with their school uniforms! Don't they look similar? In fact they do; not only in their physical appearances, but also with respect to certain perceptions about them.

Generally, attributes like playfulness, innocence, purity, goodness, naiveté, etc. are used while talking about a child.

• Learning Achievements of Children are Determined by Heredity

No. Learning achievements of children are not linked to heredity in any way. Stigmas and prejudices have influenced notions among teachers and school administrations about the learning potential of children from different backgrounds. Social experiences of children in elementary schools across India point towards the fact that such notions are often based on prejudices and stigmas regarding caste, class, religion, ethnicity and language.

• School Kids' Are Different from 'Street Kids'

No. Children are not born with any prescribed identities. Rather they are given these or they gradually acquire them. It is often observed that among different learners “school identity” and “social identity” do not match in the perception of teachers and educators. For instance, the salience of school kids is often found in perceiving them as “homely”, “good” and “obedient”. They are “silent”, “serious” and do their homework properly, and generally listen to the teachers. They dress smartly, are neat and clean, maintain good hygiene and their parents take a keen interest in their education. On the contrary the identity of street kids is relegated to “non-serious” learners in the classroom. Street children often suffer from poor motor control. Their restlessness, the “adult-like” orientation in their behaviour is stigmatized in a diverse classroom as having “deviant” characters.

• Boys Are for Schools, Girls Are for Marriage

No. It is a traditionally created male viewpoint. So far, schools have also represented and reproduced such a conservative perception about the girl child. For instance, take the case of the Meo Muslim girl children of Rajasthan who are first-generation learners. A comparative study between two villages, one in which a school intervention was conducted and the other where it was not, revealed minimal school participation and integration by the Meo Muslim girl child. A typical day for the Meo girl child starts at dawn and ends late in the evening. She prepares breakfast, milks the cattle, fetches water from the pond, cooks the lunch food, washes clothes, collects dry wood and leaves, feeds the cattle, takes care of her younger siblings and helps members of the house with other chores “Savere se shaam tak kaam hoe hai, ladke to na karen (we work from early morning to evening but boys don't work)” says Afsana (14 years), a first-generation Meo Muslim learner.

• **Children Learn Only from Textbook Transaction by Teachers in the Classroom!**

No. Children learn more outside the four walls of the classroom by interacting within the socio-cultural milieu in which they are born and brought up. There is a widespread belief that children learn more from school textbooks and teachers. Intelligent learners are held to be those who can better remember what is in the textbook and reproduce it in examinations.

• **Inclusive Education Means Enrolment of All Children in School**

In the dominant discourse on elementary education in India, the meaning of inclusive education appears to be limited to merely school enrolment of children from all sections of society. Inclusive education, therefore, needs to move beyond just enrolment to denote a feeling among all learners of "belonging equally" to the school, irrespective of their backgrounds. Inclusive classrooms and schools in this sense would mean a place where diversity among learners is appreciated and considered a learning resource rather than a problem; where children from diverse backgrounds are valued for what they are, and can feel safe enough to express whatever they know, without fear or discrimination; and where the curriculum, teaching-learning methods and materials are culturally responsive to meet the different learning needs and interests of children from diverse backgrounds.

Contemporary Challenges

The myths discussed in the previous section provide a glimpse of how formidable the challenge to educate diverse learners has become. In fact, as the school system becomes increasingly diverse, relationships inherent in its structure (student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, administrator-to-teacher, school boards-to-administrators, parent-to-teacher, etc.) also become more complex. By bringing together myriad social affiliations, gender orientations, economic levels, belief systems, and cultural norms, the institution of schooling poses a plethora of challenges which are not limited only to classrooms but also include the space outside the formal classroom. Some of the specific challenges in this regard are:

• **Recognizing the Increasing Diversity of Classrooms**

There is a need to recognize the changing social composition of learners in the classroom resulting from the increased flow of children from varied backgrounds in terms of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc. This diversity also presents new issues and challenges to change curriculum design, teaching-learning practices and processes, learning materials, teacher education, etc. so that they meet the different learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds. In order to address these issues and challenges, policymakers and practitioners need to first recognize the different learning needs and interests of the diverse learners.

• **Developing and Maintaining Disaggregated Databases on Diverse Learners**

The increasing participation of diverse learners in the classroom has radically altered the social composition of elementary schools in India. Data on learning achievement, however, reveals a significant gap between children from different backgrounds. But, without a clear understanding of the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of these diverse learners, it is difficult to evolve strategies and develop plans at the classroom, school and system levels to teach these children. It is therefore necessary to collect relevant disaggregated data on diverse learners, and examine and analyse it in order to inform and shape policies and practices to make classrooms and schools inclusive and responsive to the learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

• **Developing Ethnographic Research Focused on Teacher Beliefs and Practices**

A contextualized understanding of teacher beliefs and behaviour as well as the teaching-learning practices and processes, and their impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of children from diverse backgrounds is a crucial prerequisite to develop inclusive classrooms that are responsive to these children's learning needs and interests. Without this, it will be difficult to assess the professional development needs of teachers, and evolve appropriate training curriculum, practices and processes for them. Therefore, there is a critical need for school-based ethnographic research which can better inform policy and practice.

• **Need For a Greater Focus on Diversity Issues in Teacher Training and Teacher Education Programmes**

An effective and meaningful framework for teacher training and teacher education programmes would identify several professional development needs of teachers. To be effective, the framework should be linked to the changing social landscape of the contemporary elementary classroom in India. Teaching children from diverse backgrounds requires a tremendous amount of flexibility in teaching practices and processes as well as in curriculum design and learning materials. It also crucially involves reflecting on and examining teachers' personal and professional beliefs about diversity based on caste, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc., and analyzing how these influence their behaviour and relationships with children from diverse backgrounds.

• **Maintaining Teacher Diversity in the Elementary Teaching Workforce**

Maintaining diversity in the teacher workforce is considered crucial for creating inclusive schools. They may also be more inclined to view student diversity in the classroom as a resource. However, data in this regard suggests that while there has been an increasing flow of diverse learners in the classroom, the social profile of teachers has almost remained the same. The participation of the excluded groups in the teaching force, such as women, SC/STs, and religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities have remained lopsided within the recruitment processes. Moreover, a majority of the teachers recruited from these social categories in recent years are para-teachers who have remained out of the formal teacher training structure (Govinda, 2005), and their lower educational qualification and lack of professional training debar them from developing their professional careers.

• **Developing Organic School-Community Relationships**

Involving parents and communities in school functioning can be an effective strategy to address diversity in the classroom. It also needs to be recognized that in the changing context of the increasing inflow of children from diverse backgrounds, it is important for schools to understand and articulate parent and community involvement in terms of socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. The current official mechanisms and structures (VECs and PTAs, etc.) prescribed to ensure community involvement do not appear to achieve the desired outcomes, particularly with regard to participation of the marginalized and excluded communities. In several villages, the local people are not even aware of the existence of VECs and their roles and responsibilities. In many cases, VECs become platforms for the powerful sections of the local society, and the marginalized and excluded communities feel powerless to assert their voices and participate in the functioning of the schools.

CONCLUSION:

The challenges of inclusive classrooms and diversity discussed above appear formidable, especially because the mainstream policy and practice in the elementary education sector have yet to adequately recognize and focus attention on them. On the other hand, it is fortunate that during the recent decades, these issues and concerns have started getting the attention of a section of policymakers and practitioners. Various innovative experiments in school reforms have also been taken up by civil society organizations as well as in the government sector in different parts of the country. These experiments have attempted curriculum design, development of teaching-learning methods and materials, and teacher development with child-centred inclusive perspectives. These have shown encouraging results in terms of the learning achievement of children from diverse backgrounds.

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