

Inclusive Education at Primary Level: Reality or Phantasm

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to assess the impacts of Inclusive Education (IE) Project implemented in government schools of Islamabad and anticipate its practicability for public schools. Quantitative and qualitative methods were applied for data collection. Study instruments were structured interviews, unstructured focus group discussions, and questionnaire. The study revealed that Students with Disabilities (SWDs) carry positive attitudes about their mainstreaming and promote friendships among them. The accessibility of school infrastructure normally addresses the needs of all students, but curriculum, equipment, teaching, learning aids, and assessment methods need to be adjusted. Principals in the schools have a positive attitude towards IE and suggested the government take more concrete measures toward mobilizing financial and technical resources for the training of teachers and providing them with technological support. Teachers involved in IE practices have a positive attitude for inclusion of SWDs and they proposed that it can be replicated in all public schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, disability, primary education, mainstreaming

Introduction

Education is not a privilege, but a right of every child. It is the responsibility of the state to provide free educational opportunities to all children irrespective of cast, creed, race or religion. Article 28 of the United Nation Convention on Rights of Children (UNCRC, 1989) emphasizes on compulsory primary education for all and making educational and vocational information and guidance accessible to all children. Article 23 bounds state parties to ensure that Children with Disabilities (CWDs) enjoy a full and decent life. It also states that all children may have access to, and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality. Furthermore, the article also urges to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) and to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education. According to World Conference, Education for All (1990) in Jomtien, Thailand, many students at primary level are out of schools due to different factors such as poverty, incompetent teachers, lack of facilities, and provision of educational opportunities. The United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes the importance of mainstreaming of persons with disabilities as an integral part of relevant strategies for sustainable development. It also bounds state parties to ensure full enjoyment of CWDs of all human rights and fundamental freedom on an equal basis with other children. Article 24 of the convention further limits the state governments to ensure IE at all levels (UNCRPD, 2008).

Inclusion is the process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all children through increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion from education. Bartolo, (2010) reported that only 2% Children with Difficulties (CWDs) attend schools while one third of total out of school children are CWDs. According to Tahir and Khan (2010), about 20 % of the world's poorest people are those with some sort of disability. Over 90 % of CWDs in developing countries do not attend schools and 30% of the world children living on the street are with disabilities. The literacy rate for adults with disabilities is as low as 3% and in some countries as low as 1% for women with disabilities. The above facts are a proof of the fact that the dream of EFA cannot come true without ensuring that all the children, including CWDs and other vulnerable children have access

to mainstream education. IE is the only way to ensure that all children are attending school including CWDs.

In Pakistan, CWDs are divided into groups such as, Rural Girl Children, Marginalized Children, Vulnerable Children, Working Children, and Children with Difficult Circumstances. They are excluded from mainstream education and development (Govt. of Pakistan, 2005). The Government of Pakistan (2009) has endorsed IE for the first time in the country. It states that if immediate attention is not paid to reduce social exclusion and move towards inclusive development in Pakistan, the country may face unprecedented social turmoil. It further states that uneven distribution of resources and opportunities promote social exclusion in society. Increased social exclusion expresses itself in different forms like ethnic strife, sectarianism, and extremism. Social exclusion or extremism is not exclusively a function of the curriculum, but it is also an outcome of traditional factors like poverty, inequity, and discrimination. Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) in collaboration with international non-governmental organizations implemented IE project in twelve primary and secondary schools. The aim of this project was to mainstream Students with Disability (SWD) in public schools. Efforts were made to build the capacity of in-service teachers to implement and practice IE. Schools were made accessible for SWDs in terms of infrastructure and classroom equipment. Authorities and parents were sensitized about IE. Keeping in view the existing scenario, this study is an attempt to assess the impact of IE in government schools of FDE in Islamabad. It included assessing the impacts of inclusive approach on the learning of SWDs, assessment of physical infrastructure accessibility and analyses of the opinions of SWDs, teachers and principals about IE. It is a step forward to find out the impacts of the IE on different stakeholders and to identify the gaps in its implementation so that better results may be achieved in future. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to formulate a better strategy for the implementation of IE in Pakistan and will provide insights to bridge the gap in the learning of SWDs and mainstream students. It will also help to achieve the target of UPE and will promote national cohesion and solidarity.

Literature Review

IE is a process by which a school attempts to respond to all students as individuals, through its curriculum and organization. It involves bringing support services to the child, rather than moving the child to the services. Ferguson (2008) argued that in USA and Europe, the interventions of IE were started as a part of Special Education for SWDs in the 1980s. Researchers and educationists made efforts in Europe and USA to include SWDs in mainstream schools, which did yield better results. Millions of children in South Asia are out of schools and majority of them are SWDs. The reasons of this exclusion are non-accessibility or lack of responsibility of the regular education system to accommodate them in schools. Studies conducted by Neary and Halvorsen (1995) and Lilian and Sandy (2010) found that an IE system is needed to accommodate children with diverse educational needs from all segments of society. They endorsed that the regular education system needs changes to accommodate individuals with special needs. Roger and Julie (2001) and Khan, Ahmed, and Ghaznavi (2012) concluded that IE is not concerned only with SWDs, but it also talks about all those who are under privileged and do not have access to educational facilities on an equal basis. Sebba (1996) argued that IE is a social movement against any type of exclusion from education.

According to Brownell, Ross, Colon and McCallum (2005), IE is an evolutionary process and goes beyond the simple idea of incorporating SWDs into the regular school environment. It provides wider scope for educational reforms to respond to the needs of diverse cultural and social groups as well as to enhance the uniqueness of each child. It can be less expensive, as it contributes to lower drop-out rates and may have a positive impact on the achievement of higher learning outcomes. According to Ajuwon (2008), children are more likely to learn social skills in an inclusive environment. Kuyini and Desai (2007) concluded that successful inclusive practices in regular classrooms enhance the positive attitude of the teachers towards SWDs and their education. It is an important function of education to teach learners how to live together as it has the potential to reduce fear for building friendship and mutual understanding between SWDs and society. Thus, it is hoped that inclusive schools would bring about a change in attitudes towards diversity by educating all children in an inclusive manner.

This would transform the world into a just, non-discriminatory, and inclusive society for all.

Lipsky and Gartner (1996) state that teachers need training to meet the challenges of IE so that they may develop confidence in their abilities, knowledge and skills to meet the challenges that they encounter in IE schools. Experience of working in IE system may play a very important role in improving their professional skills. Pre-service teacher education program may ensure adequate preparedness for the task of educating all students within the regular classroom. Moreover, continuing professional development is essential to maintain quality education for all students. This shows that before introducing IE system, teachers should be appropriately trained and motivated. School based mentoring through teacher collaboration, learning, and self-reflection can make the inclusion of SWDs easier because it enhances the learning, knowledge, skills, wisdom, and insights of the teacher in an untraditional manner (Bartolo, 2010; Norwich & Nash, 2011; Rose, 2001; Zenija, 2011). Head teachers recommend that this is not only about teacher training, but a holistic approach is required for the implementation of IE which includes trained teachers, trained support staff, accessible infrastructures, and accessible teaching/learning aids.

Lilian and Sandy (2010) opine that there are certain barriers which halt the movement of IE. These may include socio-economic barriers, discriminatory or negative attitudes, inflexible curriculum, communication barriers, inaccessible and unsafe environment, inadequate support services, lack of parental involvement and trained human resources. Klingner, Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm and Elbaum (1998) concluded that IE is expensive because it needs full time support and one-on-one instruction from highly trained special education teachers to make it a success. Its expensiveness is one of the barriers in the way of IE, especially in developing countries. According to Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) and Bender, Vail, and Scott (1995), teachers' negative attitudes towards mainstreaming of SWDs can also hinder the way to the implementation of IE. Yasmeeen, Minto and Khan (2010) suggest that at an operational level, inadequate infrastructure, limited learning materials, and teaching skills coupled with insufficient clinical service support lead to the exclusion of SWDs from

the mainstream system. Poverty, disability, conflict, and a lack of supporting policy frameworks are also some of the key contributing factors to exclusion.

The government of Pakistan has ratified UNCRC and UNCRPD that require any country to ensure that SWDs are getting education in mainstream education system without any discrimination. The government is also a signatory of MDGs and EFA declarations that urge to address the educational needs of SWDs and other marginalized children. National Education Policy of Pakistan (2009) endorses social inclusion and child friendly IE. It has also recognized the social role of education and recommends that education is not only about the individual; it has a societal role of selecting, classifying, distributing, transmitting, and evaluating educational knowledge, reflecting both the distribution of power and the principle of social contract. The educational system in Pakistan is blamed for strengthening the existing inequitable social structure because very few people from the public sector educational institutions move up the ladder of social mobility. If immediate attention is not paid to reducing social exclusion and moving towards inclusive development in Pakistan, the country may face unprecedented social upheavals (Government of Pakistan, 2009). According to UNICEF (2003), there is no comprehensive data available on the educational status of CWDs in Pakistan. IE is a new concept; therefore, only a few schools are striving to create an inclusive environment through experimentation with various approaches.

Methodology

Purpose and Design

The purpose of this study was to measure the impact of Inclusive Education Project implemented in government schools of Islamabad. Mixed method research was used by applying quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approach is useful to collect detailed data about the factual status of the project, whereas qualitative method is useful to get insight about the intangible aspects of the study. Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan where FDE is the department responsible for the provision of educational services in capital territory through its 404 federal government

schools. IE project was piloted in twelve schools under the ambit of FDE. The sample included 12 principals, 24 trained teachers, and 196 SWDs in these schools. These schools are situated in different sectors of Islamabad and the student enrollment is usually from the catchment areas of the schools. The study was delimited to students studying in grade 5 of the inclusive schools.

Participants

Random sampling technique was applied to select the sample of the study. This technique allowed inclusion participants on an equality basis and helped to generalize the results of the study on the entire population. Six out of twelve schools were randomly selected. At the second stage, purposive sampling technique was applied to select the teachers and SWDs. Two teachers from each school who got IE training and all the SWDs in grade five were taken as a sample of the study.

Data Collection

The structured interview was constructed to collect the data from the principals that consisted of open ended questions related to the objectives of the study. It was validated by experts and their suggestions consisting of 12 items were incorporated. It was pilot tested before administration. The questionnaire for the students was constructed after a thorough review of the literature. This was also validated by the experts and pilot tested before administration. A check list was constructed after consultation with the accessibility expert belonging to Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP) to assess the accessibility of the school infrastructure for SWDs. Focal persons for IE and trained teachers facilitated the process of filling the items of the checklist to assess the accessibility. Focal group discussion was arranged to get insights about the intangible aspects of the study.

Procedure

The researcher visited FDE and obtained permission for the collection of data. A meeting with the focal persons of IE was arranged to

develop a schedule of school visits and to ensure the availability of all SWDs and the principals in the school. The researcher interviewed the principals, and the responses were recorded. Focus group discussion was held with the teachers trained in IE to find their view points about the impact of IE project. The topics of the focused discussion were pertaining to their opinion about SWDs, viewpoint about infrastructural accessibility, their capacity to teach special need students, and their suggestions about improving the system. The questionnaires were administered on the SWDs studying in 5th grade. Throughout the research process, ethical consideration was kept in mind.

Results and Findings

The data collected through interviews, checklist, focus group discussions, and questionnaire were organized, tabulated, and analyzed by applying different statistical formulas. The qualitative data collected from the interview were analyzed by applying the method of content analyses, enlisting the emerging themes. A structured interview of six principals working in inclusive schools illustrated their viewpoints about IE in their schools. The emerging themes were:

Inclusive education and its importance

The sample group defined IE in different ways. It was revealed that the principals who had the experience of working in an inclusive environment had sufficient knowledge of IE. One of the principals said:

“Including students with mild and moderate disabilities in mainstreaming schools is called IE.”

While another expressed:

“Education is the basic right of every child so IE means educating every child including children with disabilities.”

The participants were of the view that IE addresses the educational needs of all those children in the mainstream who are socially excluded and it provides training and education opportunities to those children who

were usually not accepted by society. Generally, the participants were of the view that IE should be replicable in other areas of the country, provided it had proper planning and arrangements like resource allocation, trained teachers, and mobilization of parents and communities.

Modification in school infrastructure and capacity building of teachers

The participants identified certain modifications in the school infrastructure as a prerequisite for launching IE programs, which were: (a) trained teachers, (b) ramps, (c) equipment (audio-visual aids, CCTVs, LVDs), (d) development of resource rooms, and (e) sensitization of communities and parents. Principals and teachers who had attended related trainings and workshops showed a positive attitude for IE and mainstreaming of SWDs. They viewed that training was a source of learning and motivation; therefore, they may be organized on an on-going basis to address the emerging problems at inclusive schools.

Challenges for SWDs in mainstream schools and their solution

Respondents shared that SWDs faced a number of problems in mainstream schools, such as taunts from peers, transport related issues, critical learning difficulties, and inaccessible school buildings. There was also a lack of adequate assessment mechanisms to assess the academic progress of SWDs in the schools, especially from the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education. IE had recently been introduced at primary level; however, there were thin possibilities of SWDs continuing their education at secondary and higher level.

To meet these challenges, different schools had adopted different approaches. Some principals gave SWDs extra time to cope with learning difficulties by involving parents in academic matters to facilitate the SWD at home. The normal students were encouraged to support their in and outside mobility. Teachers need to be trained to deal with the children according to the type of their disability by creating and promoting SWDs' friendly and enabling environment where all students may learn together. They need to be more flexible and cooperative to adjust with the SWDs

in mainstream schooling. The participants realized that dealing with SWDs was a time consuming and complex process and needed time, motivation, right temperament, hard work, and professional competency. They revealed that some teachers were not happy because of the extra work required of them. One of the principals recommended allocating a space in the classroom for SWDs, especially those with high learning performance. It was also recommended to provide an appropriate accessible examination system for SWDs in board exams.

Support from educational management

The sample group indicated that there was no appropriate support mechanism for the inclusive schools at the FDE level. FDE provided support at the commencement of the project, but was discontinued during the later phases. The teachers were making efforts diligently to make IE successful, but were given no appreciation. As a result, teachers were getting de-motivated. Some of the schools also established links with Al-Maktoom Special School for the handicapped, which coordinated with them in providing guidance and support on IE.

Parents' participation and future planning of inclusive schools

The participants shared that parents were one of the most important stakeholders in the education system, as students spend a major portion of their time at home with their parents and families. Although the school management involved the parents of these students through different ways like parent-teachers meetings, monthly meetings, and meetings with some parents on need basis. This type of meeting was not structured. Besides, a majority of parents were not able to assist in solving SWDs' problems. The participants reacted that enrolling CWDs in the schools without building capacities of the teachers and support staff would not be effective, as without proper motivation, positive attitude, and capacity of addressing the educational needs of SWDs, teachers would not be able to implement IE effectively.

Analyses of the Opinions of SWDs on Inclusive Education

The questionnaire for the SWDs contained eleven items that focused on obtaining information about the viewpoints of SWDs regarding mainstreaming, teaching and learning methodologies, and attitude of normal students towards the SWDs. Table 1 shows the analysis of students studying in special schools before joining the inclusive school, and viewpoints of SWDs about their mainstreaming and teaching learning process. This table also indicates that 65% of the sample group was studying in special education schools before joining inclusive school, whereas 35% were not attending special schools. It was found that among the students who were studying in special schools, 69 % of SWDs realized that non-disabled students liked to be friends with them, and 12 % agreed to some extent. 64 % non-disabled peers helped them in solving their learning problems, and 25 % supported to some extent. 54% viewed that their peers taunted them due to their disability, while 28% responded that non-disabled peers did not make fun of them. 44% of the sample group responded that teachers used appropriate teaching methods in the classrooms that enhanced their learning, whereas 37 % were not in favor of this statement. 52% responded that teachers gave them extra time when they needed, whereas 44 % did not agree with the statement. 61 % responded that the teachers answered their questions in the classroom politely, whereas 11 % did not agree with this statement.

Table 2 indicated the attitude of SWDs towards their normal counterparts and mainstreaming. It was revealed that the majority of the SWDs carried a positive attitude towards their mainstreaming. 61 % viewed that they spent time and played with their non-disabled peers during break hours, whereas 23 % did not agree to the statement. 52% liked to share their feelings with the mainstream students, whereas 29 % had yet to develop intimacy for sharing their feelings and problems. 98 %students viewed that they were happy on being with the non-disabled students and in the inclusive schools.

An accessibility checklist was applied to assess the infrastructural accessibility in inclusive schools. Table 3 reflected the viewpoint of teachers about the physical accessibility in inclusive schools. The sample group viewed that 66% of the schools have accessible entrance and classroom doors, whereas 17 % schools did not possess accessible entrance for the

SWDs. 34 % schools had ramps for wheel chair users. Only 34 % students responded that their schools have accessible washrooms, whereas 66 % schools did not possess accessible drinking water facility for the SWDs. 66 % schools did not possess SWDs friendly playground, and 50% schools did not have a library and tuck shop that addressed the needs of SWDs. 66 % viewed that the examination system did not respond to the needs and requirements of the SWDs and the same was the case for learning materials. 34 % of the participants were of the view that the teaching methodologies addressed the needs of SWDs.

Discussion

It was found that a majority of the SWDs had minor refractive errors which could be corrected with the help of glasses. As an illustration, in one of the schools there were five SWDs, among which four had refractive error. This is evidently a lack in teachers' knowledge about disabilities. Other factors included lack of proper training to address the educational needs of all type of SWDs, capability to deal with blind, dumb and deaf students, and lack of refresher courses to keep them updated and motivated. The teachers viewed IE as the responsibility of those teachers who had been trained to participate actively in the implementation of an IE project. They opined that addressing the educational needs of children with severe disabilities was a challenging job; therefore, they should be enrolled in special schools instead of regular schools, and were motivated to contribute to that.

The study was able to postulate that in inclusive schools some of the SWDs developed friendship with their normal peers who supported them in solving their learning problems. SWDs shared their feelings with them during the break time. This point supports the view that IE has a positive impact on the attitude of SWDs. It improves their social skills and provides them an opportunity to be included in the mainstream society. The study conducted by Bunch and Valeo (2004), Lipsky and Gartner (1996) and Baker et al (1995) also confirmed the results of the study. They have concluded that one aspect of education is friendship, and SWDs are more likely to be friendly with normal students in inclusive classrooms as compared to the special schools. They do better academically and

socially than students in non-inclusive settings, and also positively affects academic, behavioral, and social outcomes of the SWDs.

Without ensuring the infrastructural accessibility in the mainstream schools, it is not appropriate to launch an IE program. The school environment must be in accordance with the special needs of the students. The classrooms, playgrounds, and drinking water facilities should be accessible to all students; however, there are some contradictions in the responses of teachers and SWDs. For example, a majority of the SWDs shared that toilets were accessible to them, but according to the teachers all schools do not have accessible toilets and same is the case about playground and library facilities. Teaching methods, assessment practices, and learning aids should also be as per the needs of the SWDs. The SWDs and teachers viewed adjustment in the assessment practices, teaching methods, and content materials as deficits.

The study also sets forth the fact that the principals' attitude was quite positive for the inclusion of the SWDs in mainstream schools. They viewed IE as very important and recommended its replication in all the schools. However, they also realized that such planning needs adequate financial support and management and monitoring from the authorities. These results were also confirmed by Jeff (1997) who concluded that the principals had shown positive attitudes towards inclusion, and they were well aware of the concept and importance of inclusive education. Teachers need more training to address the educational needs of SWDs. The study ascertained that the teachers who were trained in inclusive education and had some experience of working with SWDs had a more positive attitude towards IE. Studies conducted by Zenija (2011), Michelle (2007) and Rose and Howley (2001) have also reported similar results about the preparation and training of teachers.

The study revealed that FDE had instructed all schools to enroll SWDs in mainstream schools but the management did not provide sufficient support to do so. There was no monitoring and feedback mechanism in place to track the progress of these schools. The principals viewed that IE could be implemented more successfully if the government invested sufficient resources. They expressed their concern about the lack of

resources in terms of human, physical, technologies, and technical support. The main challenges in inclusive schools were a reduced number of trained teachers, lack of necessary technologies, inadequate examination procedures, absence of transportation, and medical facilities. These challenges are in line with the studies reported by Jeff (1997) and Alghazo (2002).

Recommendations

Following are the recommendations that emerged from the study:

1. The study recommends that special needs of the SWDs may be considered at the planning phase of the construction of school buildings, and policy makers may provide sufficient funding to furnish schools with necessary equipment to meet the requirements of SWDs.
2. Teacher training institutes may take measures to revise and update curriculum to prepare and train teachers to teach SWDs in mainstream schools. They should also arrange in-service training courses to solve the emerging problems in inclusive schools.
3. Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISEs) in Pakistan may formulate policy to facilitate the SWDs to appear in board examinations.
4. It is recommended that donor agencies and other corporate sectors should be invited to contribute financial and technical resources for the implementation of quality inclusive education in Pakistan.
5. Government should replicate inclusive education in all government schools and guide private schools to follow to ensure the implementation of National Education Policy of Pakistan.

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Table 1 Analysis of Students Studying in Special Schools Before Joining Inclusive School

Name	Principal	Focal Person	Teachers	Student
Islamabad Model School for Girls, G -11/2	1	1	2	52
Islamabad Model School for boys No. 02, I- 9/4	1	1	2	05
Islamabad Model School for Boys, I- 9/4	1	1	2	05

View point of SWDs about their mainstreaming and teaching learning process

Statement	Yes	%	No	%	To some extent	%
You studied in special education system before getting admission in inclusive school	71	65	38	35	0	0
Friendships between SWDs and their no-disabled peers	75	69	21	19	13	12
Support of SWDs by Non-disabled students in solving learning problems	70	64	12	11	27	25
Hooting on SWDs due to their disabilities	59	54	31	28	19	18
Appropriateness of teaching methods and instructional materials for SWDs	48	44	40	37	21	19
Use of Audio Visual aids in teaching	20	18	80	74	9	8
Teachers help SWDs in the class when they need extra support	57	52	48	44	4	4
Teachers responded to the questions of SWDs	66	61	12	11	31	28

Table 2

Analysis About the Attitude Of Non- Disabled Peers Towards SWDs and Accessibility of School Infrastructure

Statement	Yes	%	No	%	To some extent	%
SWDs spend time and play with other students during break	66	61	25	23	18	16
Do SWDs like sharing their feelings with their class fellows	56	52	32	29	21	19
Do they feel happy on studying with normal students	107	98	2	2	0	0

Table 3

Analysis of the Responses of Focal Persons About Physical Accessibility in Inclusive Schools

S.No		Yes	No	To some extent	Yes	No	To some extent
1	Accessible entrance	4	1	1	66%	17%	17%
2	Accessible doors	4	1	1	66%	17%	17%
3	Ramps for wheel chairs	2	2	2	34%	33%	33%
4	Accessible washrooms	2	2	2	34%	33%	33%
5	Accessible drinking water facility	1	4	1	17%	66%	17%
6	Accessible play ground	1	4	1	17%	66%	17%
7	Accessible library, computer labs, tuck shop	2	3	1	33%	50%	17%
8	Accessible Examination and assessment method	0	4	2	0%	66%	34%
9	Accessible learning materials	1	3	2	17%	50%	33%
10	Accessible teaching methodologies	2	2	2	34%	33%	33%