

A Case of an Inclusive School: Its Features and Reasons for Failure

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Abstract: Inclusion is a concept which views children with disabilities as true full time participants and members of their neighborhood schools and communities. The inclusion philosophy proposes that there not be a range of placements but that rather all students be educated with their peers in the same physical location. (Knight. B. A.). Following successful implementation of inclusive concepts and principles around the world, Pakistan is also starting to work towards them. The population estimate for Pakistan is 164 million (July 2007). With a conservative estimate of prevalence of disabilities (3%), about five million persons suffer from some kind of disability. Literacy rate is less than 4%, so out of 2.5 million more than 2.4 million are illiterate. The state of education of children with disabilities in Pakistan is very poor. If they have an opportunity of getting education at all, it is usually in segregated schools, which generally offer very low level of education. Very few mainstream schools open their doors to children with disabilities. This paper will present a case of a mainstream school, which practiced Inclusive Education principles. It will describe the school's structure, programs and some of its achievements in implementing the Inclusive Education principles. It will also describe some of the challenges the school faced and strategies it adopted to overcome them. Areas where it could have improved and possible strategies will also be discussed. This paper will highlight the importance of Inclusive Education in Pakistan. It will share the likely challenges that will come in the way of its implementation in Pakistani context. It will make a strong case for Inclusive Education as a practical idea in Pakistani schools.

Keywords: Inclusion, segregation, disabilities, benefits, challenges

Background

The educational institutions in Pakistan are stratified according to different groups. For example, there are schools organized along the lines of medium of instruction (English, Urdu, regional languages etc), focus of instruction e.g., religious or otherwise.

Along ability lines, the schools are either mainstream schools or segregated special schools, such as schools for children with Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, and Intellectual Impairment. All these can be government, private, community based, NGO operated and missionary operated schools.

It is clear from this description of the system that the division in this system are marked and well defined, with each addressing a different section of the society.

Inclusion is a concept which views all children with disabilities as true full time participants and members of their neighborhood schools and communities. The inclusion philosophy proposes that there should not be a range of placements but rather that all students be educated with their peers in the same physical location (Mercer 1997).

The first part of this paper describes a school which aligned the principles of this concept with its practice. It describes its structure, programs and some of its achievements. The second part describes some of the challenges it faced, areas where it could have improved and the reasons for its eventual failure.

The making of an inclusive school

Established in 1995 the school was located in an affluent area of Karachi.

Administrative Structure

The person who owned the school was not involved in the policy making, administration and day to day running of the school. The administration consisted of experienced educationists who believed in including children with disabilities in the mainstream school. It consisted of a principal, an administrator and a coordinator. The school started teaching classes up to grade 5 and with a small number of students, but quickly grew to Matric and O-level with a student population of about 400.

Admission procedure

The admission procedure for all children consisted of an admission test and interview of the parents. The children with disabilities were asked to sit for a test to assess their academic level. Assessment reports by the psychologists were required before the admission process began. The administration interviewed the parents. They gave

provisional admission to children with special needs and the child was allowed to attend the school and the teachers reported on the behavior of the child in the class. The administration also observed the child in the classroom. If the child was not very disruptive and the teacher felt that the child will be able to adjust to the routine of the school and she would be able to work with the child in the class, the admission was confirmed.

Inclusive Stream

The administrator was responsible for dealing with the matters concerning the “inclusive stream children” (as they were referred to in that school). Under her worked a “remedial educator”. The children with disabilities were placed in the mainstream classrooms and their number was limited to 2-3 in a class of 25 children. There were children with mild intellectual impairment, learning disabilities including Dyslexia, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), Down’s Syndrome, Autism, Spina Bifida, visual and hearing impairments.

Academic Structure

The children attended the regular classes with mainstream teachers. Their sessions with the remedial educator were planned in such a way so as not to disturb their regular teaching and learning activities. These took place in the library, games or computer periods keeping in view the child’s interest and needs. A plan was developed for each child individually after careful observations in the class and keeping in view the psychological assessments. The administrator and the remedial educator developed these plans. There were meetings between the administrator, the remedial educator and the classroom teacher on a need basis during the development of the plan and during the implementation phase. The goals for each child were defined and the teachers and the remedial teacher would work with the child to support him/her in achieving them. In the class the children with special needs were expected to do the same work as the rest of the class but the amount and level of work accepted was different from the rest of the class depending on the level of performance, expectations and goals for that particular child. In the individual sessions the remedial educator worked on building concepts and enhancing

the learning of the child by giving him/her the strategies for learning and building skills to cope in the classroom.

Co-curricular activities

All children were expected to participate in the co-curricular (also known as extracurricular) activities, such as sports, school band, *Milad* (religious ceremonies), music and karate trainings. The children with special needs were encouraged to be part of the teams and represented the school in events taking place outside their own school and at other schools/institutions.

Assessment practices

Summative assessment methods were used to assess the progress of all children. The children with special needs had tests and examinations designed separately for each individual child, keeping in mind their level of performance, their classroom performance and the expectations based on the goal of their individual plans.

Support Structures

The school had the services of a school doctor who was responsible to conduct the routine yearly check up of all students and handle emergency situations. The doctor also maintained the records of the allergies and medical conditions of students and would advise the teachers about their handling in the class room taking due care to maintain confidentiality.

The role of the administration

The attitude towards inclusion had a top down flow. The administrator had agreed with the owner to work for establishing the school on the condition that it would be an inclusive school. So all policies and decisions taken by the administrator and the principal reflected their philosophy of education in which inclusion had a central place. As the role of a principal is to be “the architect of the institution” (Singal, 2005) and he/she influences and weaves out ideas, makes up the policy that will influence Inclusive Education and its realization in the school. As in this case, the administration believed in inclusion, therefore, the school had a positive attitude towards inclusion. The whole staff, including the non-academic staff, had a positive attitude towards children with

disabilities. The caring attitude was deliberately calibrated to help the students achieve their potential and not hinder it with too much support which might damage their self esteem. The discipline rules were the same for all children, but were not applied as stringently in the case of children with special needs. For example, the school gate would close at 8.05 and no staff or student was allowed in after that except children with special needs. It was recognized that they may sometime require more time, due to medical reasons, and this was not resented by the rest of the students. The social equality of children with special needs did not come into question in spite of their medical needs. They were deemed to be holders of equal rights and responsibilities as their peers without disabilities.

Positive attitude towards inclusion

The school had a very inclusive atmosphere. All children were expected to take part in all the activities of the school. This atmosphere was most evident in the playground and at break time. All children played together and it was not evident to a newcomer who among the children playing might be the ones with special needs. Everybody had to form queues and wait for taking turns.

Benefits that the students got from inclusive school

- a. **Academic benefits:** Swanson and Finnan (2003, page 319), describing a case of a fifth grade student of an Inclusive school state that “all students need and desire learning that is of high intellectual quality - learning that is substantive, authentic and relevant. Strategies that allow accelerated learning for all students include: instructional practices that focus on advanced skills learning with basic skills embedded within the learning; a curriculum which is rich, interesting, and substantive; and school and classroom environments where high expectations are held for students, parents and teachers. Accelerated learning happens when teachers are highly accomplished and students are active and responsible for their own learning.” In this school, the expectations from the children with special needs were high and the atmosphere was one of caring and supporting. This resulted in the students benefiting academically.

There was concrete evidence of that. Students from other schools came with quite dismal report cards and showed a lot of improvement in their academic accomplishments, much more than even their parents' expectations.

- b. **Social benefits:** the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) states the principle that children should be educated in inclusive schools, based on the premise that inclusive schools are most effective at building solidarity between children with special needs and their peers. The social benefits for children with and without special needs were evident. The children without special needs were accepting diversity. They recognized that in the school children with special needs were equal to children without special needs. At the same time they realized that the children with special needs sometimes needed more in terms of academic, medical or social attention and were accepting of that and willing to provide it if needed. Even now when the inclusive stream has been closed down for years, if I come across some children from that school, I find that the attitude that they have towards people with special needs is significantly more accepting and helping than usual. There were some incidents to the contrary too, but by and large not common. For example, there was a 14 year old child Kashif with Spina Bifida. He also had a mild learning disability. This child could walk but had no bladder and bowel control. He would wear diapers to the school. There was another child, Farid, in the same class who had Dyslexia. Farid would discriminate against Kashif, and would not sit with him. As the school culture did not support such behavior, Farid was not very overt with his attitude and there was no name calling, but the discrimination was very subtle. Interestingly, this attitude did not extend to the other children in the class, who were quite friendly with Kashif.

The school culture also promoted friendship among the students. The friendship between some children with and without special needs survived for a number of years even after the closing down of the inclusion stream.

Ongoing professional development of teachers

Teaching in a school which makes allowances for individual variation in needs

of students, gives teachers the opportunity to develop their expertise. The class teacher has the main responsibility for facilitating education in the class. In order to tackle the great variation and diversity of the effective inclusive classroom, teacher education is considered as the first step to attain the realization of an inclusive school (Meijer, Pijl & Hegarty, 1997; Flem and Keller, 2000). If we look at our context in Pakistan, the availability and standard of teacher education is generally insufficient. Teachers generally enter into teaching profession without any professional training. Similar was the case in this school too. Generally, the teachers had average qualifications (majority Bachelors with some Masters Degree holders, but not in education). The in-service training consisted of some teacher training workshops, but the teachers had very little training in dealing with children with special needs. The administration conducted some sessions for them either individually or in groups. These sessions were helpful in the absence of any formal training.

Restructuring of physical environment, resources, organizational change and instructional adaptations

The clear implication of the Inclusive Education movement is that mainstream schools should seek to restructure their curriculum, routines and policies in order to provide for a wide range of needs and in order to eliminate or reduce to a minimum the problem of students failing to fulfill their learning potential (Avramidis, et al, 2002). The school attempted to do that and was successful to some extent. The restructuring in the classroom organization, teaching strategies and the assessment policies all helped in reducing the students difficulties and aided their learning.

Collaboration between the parents and the school

The collaboration between the parents and the school consisted of the usual meetings and sessions between the administration and the parents. The parents were encouraged to bring their concerns to the office, and meetings with the class teachers were also arranged on the need basis. There were occasional attempts to bring the parents together and to promote collaboration between them. Parents were invited to meet with the administrator and were encouraged to form relationships in order to provide support

to each other.

An Inclusive school is an effective school

As inclusive schools take into account the individual needs of all children, and employ diverse strategies for effective learning of students, they tend to be successful schools for all their pupils. In its “Ten Reasons for Inclusion” the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education states “Given commitment and support, inclusive education is a more efficient use of the educational resources”. That it was an effective school is apparent from the fact that its students numbers rose very quickly and the school was becoming known for being a “good school”.

The ideology of one school for all implies the inclusion of all the pupils in a social, academic and cultural community. School has responsibilities for all children and young persons. However, the realization of this ideology is not without its problems. Schools have been given extended responsibilities and teachers face new requirements. Thus there are many challenges, (Flem et al, 2000).

From this description of the school is apparent that the school attempted to include children with special needs into the learning process. However, the challenges that it faced and factors that contributed to its eventual closing down can also be anticipated from the above discussion. These will now be discussed.

Challenges to inclusion and possible reasons for closure

Policy limited to some stake holders

Skidmore’s study emphasizes the need for consensus among staff over shared values and goals as a necessary condition for the success of any restructuring initiative aimed at enhancing school provision for pupils with difficulties in learning. (Skidmore, 1999).

The consensus in the school on inclusion issues was limited to the administration and the staff members. The administration had succeeded in developing an accepting attitude towards inclusion of students with special needs among the academic,

nonacademic staff and the mainstream students. However, the owners had little understanding and empathy for this new concept. In the beginning, there was no interference from the owners into the affairs of the school and the administration was free to practice their ideology. They were only concerned with the growth of the school and that was happening, so they were satisfied. However, later the administration developed some differences with the owners, over some issues not related to Inclusion, and decided to leave. Then the administration was taken over by the owners themselves. As they had little understanding of the inclusion issues and were in fact hostile towards children/people with special needs, the first step that they took was to close down the inclusion stream. The children were asked to leave and the remedial educator and the school doctor resigned in protest. So the chapter of the one of the first inclusive schools in Karachi closed.

More geared towards Integration model than towards Inclusion model

Inclusion differs qualitatively from the concept of integration, where children are placed in existing provisions, without the necessity of restructuring that environment to ensure membership (Ainscow, 1997; Thomas, 1997). Although there were attempts to restructure, it was not sufficient to ensure true inclusion. Giorcelli (1995) outlines the principles of full inclusion which include placement in neighborhood schools, zero rejection philosophy, age and grade appropriate placement, no special classes or schools, cooperative learning practiced and special education support given to regular education. In this school, not “all” children were given admission, only those that the teacher and the administrator thought they could work with. In addition a pull out program for the children with special needs was in place, with little attempt to provide all services to the child inside the classroom. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process needed to be more thought out and comprehensive. The teaching strategies used in the classroom could have been more geared towards multiple learning styles. There was limited peer coaching and no group work. There was no physical restructuring of the school for wheel chair users or children with visual impairment.

Professional development of teachers

Although some teachers were encouraged to attend some workshops and some in-house sessions were conducted by the school administrator herself, this process was not extensive and structured enough to enable the teachers to develop a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

Collaboration among teachers

The school did not foster teacher-teacher collaboration and peer coaching and mentoring among teachers. There were some brilliant teachers who understood inclusion and applied a variety of teaching strategies for enhancing the learning of all students. They could have been used as resource persons for the ongoing professional development of the teachers. There was little support from the school for this

A better developed and more committed teaching staff would have resisted the eventual closing down of the inclusive stream by the owner with more conviction.

Support services

Support services like physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and vocational training facilities are needed for the inclusive setup to function effectively. Close cooperation and collaboration between the multi-disciplinary team is essential. The school could have been instrumental in forming a nexus for this, but barring a number of single and occasional attempts, the efforts were not directed towards this goal. The presence of a doctor on the premises for full time helped in providing medical care to children, but other aspects of this important area in an inclusive setup were ignored.

Collaboration with the parents and the community

The parents-teacher collaboration, the parent-parent collaboration and collaboration /dialogue with the community helps in building a school culture which is inclusive and helping for all . This aspect was neglected by the administration.

Lack of vocational training facilities/Certification

Children with disabilities need a supported environment to help in their transition from the school to the job market. These support services were not present and

in the absence of any formal school leaving certificate, the parents were forced to take their child out of school after several years of study without any formal acknowledgement of the time spent in school.

Inclusion is a concept which is gaining increasing importance in the light of the international declarations and statements supporting inclusion and education for all. This paper is an attempt to describe what an inclusive school can be and to point out some of the challenges and pitfalls in the way of achieving a sustainable successful inclusive school in Pakistani context. Any school adopting the ideals of inclusion into their practice will find it easier to implement the policies if they are shared by all the stake holders of the school. Continued professional development of the teachers and collaboration among them will help in developing a deeper understanding of the issues involved. Collaboration of the school with parents and the local community helps in overcoming any possible barriers. The provision of support services to the children with special needs within the school helps the children in acquiring a meaningful and effective educational experience.

(All names used in the paper are pseudonyms)

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