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Inclusivity in Education: Myth and Reality

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Introduction

'Inclusivity' is the *'quality or state of being Inclusive'*¹ (Merriam Webster Dictionary) or 'the act or policy of including members or participants on the grounds of gender, race, class, disability etc' (freedictionary.com). When extrapolated to education, it can be described in terms of 'The state of including everyone in the process of education formally or informally, without any prejudice on the basis of gender, caste, region, religion, community, abilities or disabilities'. Inclusive Education, specifically in Indian context refers to the process of including children with special needs, children belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society by adopting appropriate means such as inclusive pedagogical practices, curriculum adaptations /contextualization and support services. Thus, the degree to which the process of inclusion in education is successful can be defined as inclusivity. The current paper discusses 'Inclusivity' in schools with reference to the discourse of rights, social justice and equity for Children with Special Needs (cwsn) only.

The vibrancy of school is the manifestation of its policy and beliefs into its students with the help of teachers and parents (Jha, 2002). As Madan & Sharma stated, "Inclusion encompasses curriculum flexibility, pedagogy, infrastructural changes, sensitization of parents and peers as integral components of the accommodations that schools must make practice of inclusive education, therefore, also prevents exclusion of children with disabilities from the mainstream" (2013). The inclusivity of a school or institution may be gauged through the stakeholders like parents, teachers, school and students (both CWSN and their non-CWSN peer). The paper is an attempt to explore the inclusivity in our education system with focus on inclusion of Children with Special Needs (cwsn) and evaporate the myth surrounding it.

India's Tryst with Inclusion

India has been a participant, advocator and signatory of 'The Universal Inclusion Movement' from the times of Salamanca Statement, "*.....schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions*" to United Nations Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), "*Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live*" in 2006. To/For me, Inclusion has been the core of independent India even before the 'world garnished inclusion on our platter', as declared by/in our Preamble: Constitution of India, "***WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE,***

*social, economic and political; **LIBERTY** of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; **EQUALITY** of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual the unity and integrity of the Nation”.*

In congruence with Inclusion globally Government of India inculcated Inclusion as crux of the educational policy. Right to Education, April 2009 secures elementary education as the fundamental right of every child with inclusion as its core. The major thrust of ‘Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’ a flagship program of Government of India ‘...is inclusion or mainstreaming of CWSN into the fabric of formal elementary schooling. SSA has adopted a zero rejection policy. This means that no child having special needs should be deprived of the right to education’.

Persons with Disability Act, 2005, safeguards equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation of all the individuals including children with special needs so that they prosper as an integral contributing member of society.

Despite so many exquisite policies we are yet to achieve absolute literacy even after 69 years of independence. According to MHRD report (2014) the total literacy rate is 73%, while the gender disparity is apparently visible with male literacy as 80.9 %, female literacy as 64.6% (pg 10). According to State report Cards (2014-15), the enrolment in the year of 2014-15 for class I- V, the girls was 48.19% & cwsn was 1.2% of the total enrolment across India(pg 26). Thus proving the grim footing of children with special needs (cwsn) in India, who have been the marginalised group in all the societies, all round the world.

Rationale of the study/ Purpose of the study

Nidhi Singhal comprehended the appalling statistics , “The term inclusive education appears more fancy and politically correct and hence was adopted by practitioners and policy planners without necessarily developing a clear understanding of the notion behind it” (2006). The figures mentioned above, apart from painting not so bright picture, also raise many questions: How inclusion is being practiced in the schools of the country? Is ‘Inclusivity in education’ only on papers? How is inclusion being perceived at the school level by various collaborators i.e. school, teacher, parent, peer? There is whole gamut of research papers applauding inclusion and its benediction and relatively dearth of independent studies in Indian context. With this understanding and backdrop, the present paper is an attempt to study the inclusivity in the schools in India, with the following objectives--

Objectives of the study:

1. To study teacher’s experience of an inclusive school.
2. To study social aspect of inclusion with respect to cwsn & peer.
3. To study parent’s experience of an inclusive school.

Research Design

The present study is an exploratory survey based qualitative study.

Sample

Five schools in Delhi were chosen as the sample for the present study through purposive sampling. These schools enrolled cwsn with inclusion as their core policy. From each school, five parents of cwsn, 5 regular teachers teaching class V and 10 students (5 CWSN and 5 children without special needs) were selected as sample for the study. Hence the total sample comprised of: 50 Inclusive Class V Students (25 CWSN & 25 children without special needs, referred to as peers throughout the study), 25 Parents (of cwsn only) & 25 regular teachers.

Tools

The tools prepared were all researcher made: Parents Interview schedule; Students interview schedule; Teachers interview schedule.

Data collection and analysis

The data was collected during pre-decided schools visits as per the convenience of the school and the stakeholders. The parents were interviewed during PTM. All the data was collected in between August to October 2014. The collected data was qualitatively analysed.

Limitations of the study

The study was limited to inclusive schools in Delhi .

The study was limited to students studying in class V in the sample schools.

The study was limited to only the parents of CWSN studying in the sample schools

The teachers interviewed were regular teachers teaching inclusive class V

Data Analysis and Inferences Drawn

The paragraphs below present the major observations and trends shown by the data analysis regarding inclusivity from the eyes of each stakeholder. Respondents were also interviewed on common core themes like school infrastructure, social inclusion, resource room etc. & the relevant data analysis with its interpretation is mentioned separately, for ease of understanding.

Inclusivity & Teachers

The regular teacher's experience regarding inclusion was examined with respect to school, parents & students (both cwsn & peer). While 92% of the responding teachers appreciated the schools support to cwsn, 84% accepted that workload of teachers teaching in an inclusive setting is more as compared to the schools without inclusive settings. When quizzed as to why parents of cwsn were sending kids to inclusive school instead of special school? The data analysis revealed; 'free education' (48%) and 'nearest from home' (28%) respectively as the top most responses. On probing further: Isn't inclusive education or the opportunity to intermingle with other students the biggest reason? It was answered by one of the participating teachers, "To be honest, parents are not aware of the concept of inclusion till they find us. Generally, they are dejected as no school is ready to admit their child and when they get to know of us (sources may vary). The only thing they are interested is admission. Whether we are special or inclusive becomes immaterial. It is slowly they develop a sense of inclusion through us." Adding on another teacher said, "If parents believed in inclusion, then

they would have admitted all their children in the same school. It's astonishing enough that only 34% siblings of cwsn are studying in our school.”

Talking about experience with parents, 68% of the respondent teachers stated that parents of peer are more understanding & cooperative than parents of cwsn. When enquired which parents (rich/poor; literate/illiterate) were difficult to handle/manage. The response was unanimous that education or financial status is not significantly related to parents understanding. “Look, its perception and awareness of society which remains same across all strata. The most difficult is to convince a parent that his/her child has a disability. I have seen even well educated/well bread/aware people not acknowledging their child's diverse need”, said one teacher.

With respect to academic performance and challenges faced in the process of inclusion, 56% of the responding teachers agreed that catering to the needs of cwsn (which involved providing the material/aid, coordinating with special educator etc) was the most difficult challenge faced by them in an inclusive class. 68% teachers interviewed accepted that it's difficult to bring cwsn at par with class academically. However, 88% teachers experienced adjustment of cwsn in class easy and smooth. 72% teachers believed in inclusion and acknowledged that regular teachers can efficiently manage an inclusive class with little orientation and help. 32% teachers shared that they enjoy teaching in an inclusive class while 48% believed more support and help from school was required and 20% highlighted class discipline as biggest problem in inclusion of cwsn. A teacher summed it up, “We are here to teach and this inclusion policy will work only if we are supported by school & parent.”

Inclusivity & Students(cswn & peer)

The current study defines the social aspect of inclusion as interaction or intermingling between cwsn & peer. The inclusivity was assessed in terms of experience of students with school & teachers. Data analysis revealed that 56% cwsn & 84% peer credited activity teachers (sports /music /dance /art & craft/ library teachers etc) to be relatively more empathetic. On probing further, ‘which teacher you will go to at the time of problem’? 88% peer's response was class teacher while cwsn response was divided among class teacher(52%) and special educator(44%). 48% cwsn and 56% peer named activity period as their favourite while 0% peer & 8% cwsn considered study time / subject classes as their favourite. Thus, reinforcing all students irrespective of special needs is children first who enjoy playing. When asked, ‘what do you like most about the school?’ 68% cwsn and 48% peer responded friends as the answer. It indicates that cwsn has a dearth of friends in society and hence look forward to school as an opportunity to meet people and make friends. Schools with inclusive settings basically serve as site for social inclusion. Madan & Sharma asserted that, “Students should be allocated to attend classes based on their ability, performance level, special learning needs as well as competence of teachers in handling the learning needs. Issues of grouping, frequency of interaction with the special educators, areas which require specialized help, need for psychological counselling etc. are some matters that must be resolved through consultation with all the stakeholders, 2013.

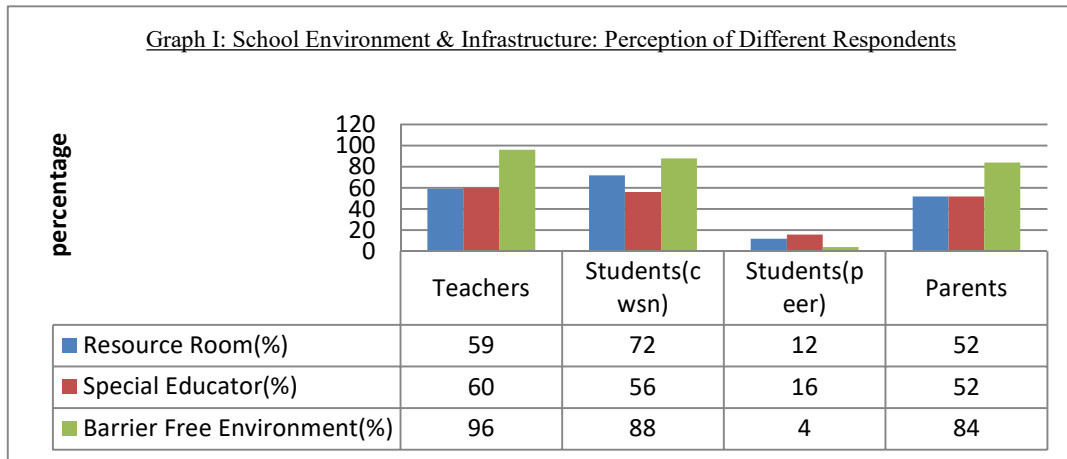
Inclusivity & Parents of cwsn

Parents perception regarding school, teachers & peer was examined during the study. 88% of the responding parents opined that school had never conducted any guidance & counselling session for them to appropriately address the need & requirement of their child. The lack of structured time for parents of CWSN provided by the school rules out the chance of meeting and discussing concerns related to education and socialisation of CWSN with other parents experiencing similar issues. When probed further they disclosed that on an individual basis they have been summoned to school every now and then. The two significant attributes recognised among teachers were patience (48%) and unbiased behaviour (44%) as listed by the parents. “If the child feels comfortable to share his problems with the teacher and she gives a patient unbiased listening to the child, the problem evaporates”, shared a parent. Although parents acknowledged the hard work of teachers as summed up by one parent, “It’s not easy teaching my child who suffers from short attention span. I see her teacher work very hard” yet the common grievance of parents (58%) was; ‘Teacher’s are mainly concerned with completing the syllabus’. 72% parents accepted their wards are lagging academically. When enquired if special school was the better option, one of parent aborted the idea by saying, “Look, it’s not about studies only. I was also scared initially but today I notice my son to be more confident in meeting people. So, don’t look from just one perspective of studies”. 65% parents were happy with inclusive school and all accepted to their initial apprehension. Researcher met a parent with physical disability who had admitted his son (without any disability) in the school. “I want my son to develop empathy towards people with disability and grow with them. That’s why I have chosen this school”.

Interpretation of Core Themes

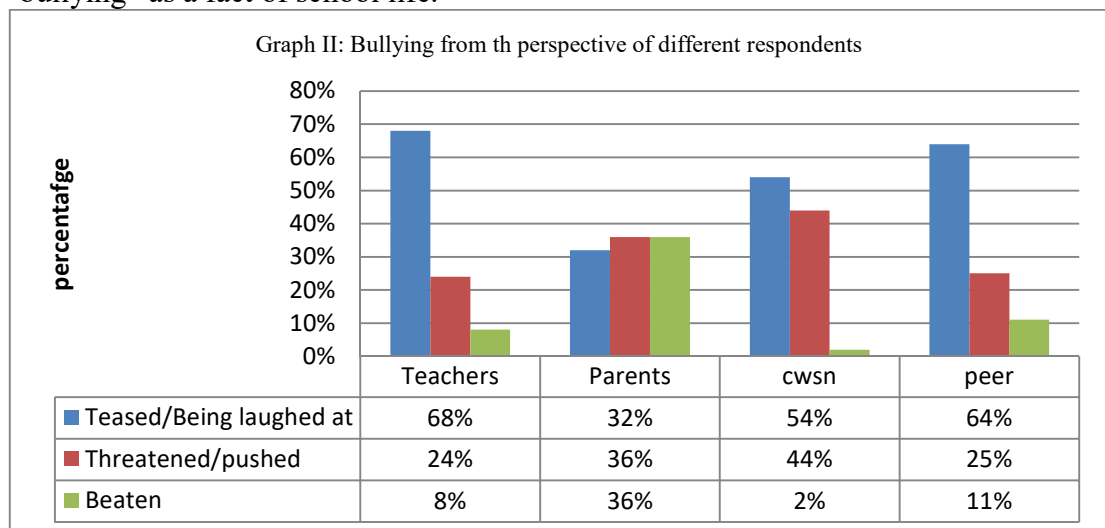
Core Theme 1: Resource room, Special educator and barrier free environment

The availability of resource room, special educator & barrier free environment(railings & adapted toilets) was sought. While peer was oblivious to the terms and had to be explained in order to understand, all the other three respondents gave mixed responses but with more than fifty percent accepting to the availability of all resources under study which coincides with the researcher observation. It was revealed that peer sensitization was required with specific reference to the needs & requirements of cwsn.



Core theme 2: Bullying

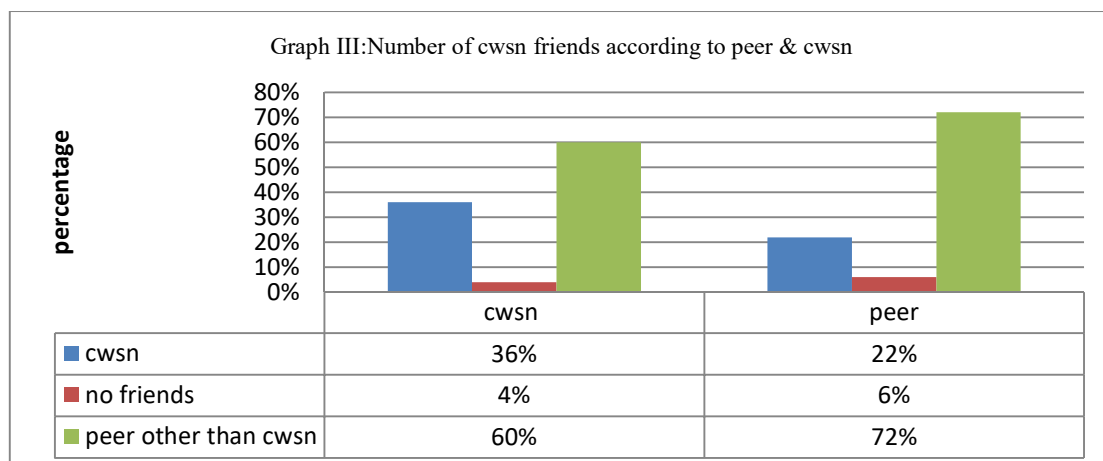
Bullying was viewed from the perspective of all respondents to understand social inclusion. Bullying behaviour was identified as being teased /laughed at, threatened/pushed and/or beaten. Teachers as well as parents accepted existence of “bullying” as a fact of school life.



The graph above revealed that the percentage of physical harassment experienced by peer was more than cwsn. All students irrespective of abilities or disabilities experience bullying to some extent.

Core theme 3: Social Inclusion in class: Intermingling/ interaction between two groups of students (cwsn & peer)

The dimension of social inclusion was gauged by requesting the sample students the details of their friendships.



The figure above indicates that 60% of cwsn & 72% of peer were friends with peer other than cwsn, whereas, 36% cwsn & 22% peer accepted having friends among cwsn. This might be pointing at a need for dedicated peer sensitization programs in inclusive schools. The data revealed that more than peer, cwsn were seeking friendship as only 4% among cwsn & 6% of peer accepted as having no friends. Thus, materialising the social inclusion of cwsn & peer in class.

Inclusivity :Myth vs Reality

In terms of infrastructure, all the schools under study had barrier free environment with ramps, railings, adapted toilets and resource room availability. While looking for the way to the resource room in one of the schools under study, the school sports teacher depicted the reality saying, “*Yes, there is a resource room. My sports room has been converted into it. I have been given a small room far from the ground. The so called resource room is generally locked.*” When probed further he said, “*I haven’t met any resource teacher or special educator, art and craft teacher is currently the in charge of the room*”. The school administration accepted the dearth of special educators and they were the contractual staff in all the schools. Despite all the imperfections, researcher noticed vibrant environment in all the schools studied.

The school authorities confirmed sensitization of teachers through workshops and in-service programs. However, in one of the schools under study, researcher observed teachers using the term CP frequently. When enquired, it was unveiled that teachers didn’t know what’s CP or it’s full form. They just heard the term from senior teacher and started using it, ignorant to the fact that every child (who isn’t visually impaired, hearing impaired or orthopedically impaired) is not CP (Cerebral Palsy). Thus, sensitization of teachers through in- service programs towards types of impairment and the specific requirements of cwsn in an inclusive setting by the school is the need of the hour as revealed by the data analysis. The teachers voiced their opinion towards two teachers per inclusive class, for better class management. The most noteworthy point in every school was it’s students. It was observed all students, cwsn and peer intermingled well. Peer were willing to help their cwsn friends. Inclusion is easiest among children who consider every being as humane and don’t perceive through the walls of classification. The general perception of parent’s towards inclusive schools was positive. Although, they admitted to initial apprehensions but were found happy that child is getting opportunity to study in an inclusive environment. The only concern of both parent’s and teachers was related to academics but they were hopeful that with

constant effort from school, teachers as well as parents, children with special needs (cwsn) will excel.

Conclusion

As John Dewey rightly said, “School is a miniature of society”(1901). School, teacher and parent are the three pillars of foundation that shape the personality of a child or to say the least; citizen of any country. The current study exposed that inclusion in India although at infancy is very much achievable. The destination is far but right beginning has been made although the road we are trudging is all uphill & ‘we have miles to go before we achieve’. From the data analysis it can be concluded that the regular teachers are more or less willingly sharing their responsibility but require onsite training and support, the CWSN are benefitted by the social inclusion in inclusive school, the peers are gaining exposure to the diversity in the society and inculcating the value of acceptance and belongingness whereas the parents were observed to be more or less satisfied with the option of nearby inclusive school. Inclusion is the way forward for this country to provide quality and meaningful education to *all* its children, and participation in this national agenda is no longer a matter of choice.(Madan & Sharma, 2013).Inclusion, at least social inclusion was observed to be occurring at the ground level. For educational inclusion to become reality lot of dedicated focussed and time bound planning is required at all levels of stakeholders and authorities. . Thus, the responsibility of government, school, parent and teacher tetrad is immense and they must lend strong support and impetus to inclusion sharing similar goals, only then, society will become inclusive in true sense.

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