

Towards Inclusive Classrooms in Our Unequal Society

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There has been an unprecedented expansion of elementary education in India in the last two decades, leading to increased enrolment and access to improved schooling facilities. This has been reflected in a promising net enrolment ratio (NER) in the primary stage of elementary education. As per District Information System for Education (DISE) data for 2010–11, enrolment exclusion is almost non-existent in the primary stage of elementary education as NER stands at 99.6%. Even though children from the disadvantaged sections of society are now going to school, the promise of inclusion, however, eludes our elementary education system and society.

Our Constitution envisioned an egalitarian society, enabling social justice and equality of opportunity also through the provision of elementary education for all. The otherwise impressive progress of education, in terms of quantitative enrolment and access, has belied this constitutional vision. This edited volume has appeared at this critical juncture in the trajectory of educational development

Dynamics of Inclusive Classroom: Social Diversity, Inequality and School Education

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in our country. It highlights with refreshing honesty, the complete indifference of the prevailing school education system in addressing the needs of marginalised children belonging to diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The progress of elementary education has been evaluated, based on the prevailing standard curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, without scrutinising the broader structures of social diversity, inequality and discrimination underlying them. Conventional school education, practising the adage “all children should be treated equally,” however, fails to accommodate the specific needs of children belonging to diverse backgrounds, particularly those from the marginalised sections of society. It has therefore remained confined to enabling the physical presence of children belonging to

diverse social backgrounds into the fold of school education, rather than facilitating their meaningful participation in the classroom. The volume argues for a change of perspective, in order to provide school education to all the children of our country according to the tenets of inclusive education, which are not the same as that of conventional schooling.

The volume is a moving appeal for inclusion in the school education system, warranting concerted efforts at facilitating greater participation in classroom processes by all children, particularly focusing on schools with more enrolment of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead of lamenting about a doomsday scenario, the volume focuses on the creation of inclusive classrooms within the existing education system. It succinctly articulates that this quest for inclusive classrooms involves: ensuring complete participation of all the children, creating a school ethos of comfort as well as safety for children from diverse social backgrounds, and attainment of minimum levels of learning for all children. The exploration of the dynamics of these varied aspects of an inclusive classroom within the wider framework of social diversity, structural inequality, and deep-rooted structures of social discrimination that characterise our society, is therefore timely and incisively contours the five sections of

the book, constituting its 10 chapters. The chapters are contextualised within the wider sociopolitical framework of school education in India. The contributors are drawn from a range of backgrounds and bring diverse voices from varied vantage points, including personal and professional trajectories as teachers, educational administrators, education activists and scholars.

The first section aims to align inclusion holistically in elementary education viewing basic education as an inalienable right of every child. The section is replete with striking empirical data reflecting enormous social and regional inequality in elementary education. The dropout rates remain alarming in primary as well as upper primary levels, especially in backward states and among socially disadvantaged sections, reflecting regional and social inequality. The high dropout rates and the failure to learn are symptomatic of the fact that the classrooms are not inclusive. The recent National Sample Survey Office data indicates that social and educational exclusion continues to remain intrinsically linked. A vital challenge of inclusive education “therefore is to move from increasing enrolment to achieving greater inclusion and quality by providing equal opportunity to all children, irrespective of their social background.”

The second section delineates the neglected relationship between social diversity and disparity in learning performance. The efforts to improve learning outcomes usually have a facetious focus on enhancing children’s mean achievement, which ignores the learning performance disparity within schools and across the communities/regions in which they are located; a relationship that this volume details. The empirical analysis of social diversity and learning achievement in Bihar’s primary education system is undertaken as one of the illustrations of this worrying relationship. Bihar’s increasing enrolment has led to more socially diverse classrooms but the learning achievement of children from marginalised sections continues to be very poor, particularly in comparison to the children from less disadvantaged backgrounds. It is argued that this is so as policies, programmes,

and practices have not been contextualised to reflect the existing social realities.

The third section scrutinises field data, reviews research studies and brings to the fore the limitations of policy pronouncements related to groups of children in unconventional learning settings. There are an estimated 1.8 crore street and working children to whom policy measures provide insufficient succour, relegating them to the informal forms of education often provided by non-state actors, typically non-governmental organisations, that focus on mere entrepreneurial/financial literacy in the name of a life skills-based education. This falls short and at best offers them chances to get off the street. More work is needed to envision possibilities to improve their life chances through education at par with the other children in our society. The lack of accessible alternatives within the normal tenets of conventional, sedentary schooling, defeats the moral intentions of a rights-based approach to elementary education.

The fourth section examines teaching and learning of English, particularly the contribution of knowledge of English to the learner’s social and cultural capital. The English language is an empowering domain of knowledge (an assumption that may be contested by multilingual educators for singling out one language). The school-based field experiences and data, including student narratives about the approach towards possibilities in inclusivity of English language teaching, call for a serious scrutiny of “learning English” vis-à-vis a “bilingual education,” as a step forward to inclusive education.

The fifth section reveals an insider’s experiences and observations of discrimination in government schools under the jurisdiction of Directorate of Education, New Delhi, where exclusionary practices marginalise children belonging to specific communities. The chapter undertakes a structuralist analysis interrogating the “prevalence of cultural majoritarianism and the pursuit of militaristic disciplinarianism in schools” due to which “cultural ethos of the school becomes largely upper caste Hindu in its orientation.” It calls for expanding the frontiers of teachers’ agency beyond how it is exercised in the dominant

discourse, so as to build a more democratic structure of education militating against cultural marginality and the reproduction of stereotypes.

Critique of Mainstream

The volume concludes with an acerbic yet convincing critique of mainstream educational psychology that dominates the prevailing schooling practices, which are based on a limited notion of what constitutes human competence. Academic achievement in formal schooling prioritises specific cognitive capacities such as reasoning, abstract thinking and standard language codes. These individual cognitive capacities and skills (leading to academic success) are typical characteristics of learners from middle-class backgrounds, not universal cognitive mechanisms underlying learning and cognition of diverse children. The low academic achievement of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is not an individual deficit of cognitive capacity but a by-product of the unequal power and status relationships that exist between different social groups. It highlights that the meaning of inclusion in plural societies cannot be understood without recognising the unequal status relationships at which socially different groups stand with reference to one another. The perspective of multicultural education, within the structure of conventional schooling, that attempted to provide educational equality for socially diverse (particularly disadvantaged) children may not fully respond to the cognitive and other

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“gaps” that emanate from children’s varied sociocultural backgrounds. The conclusion suggests that the theory of critical multiculturalism with its recognition of unequal status/power relations in society may provide a more appropriate framework in which to locate the issues of discrimination, knowledge construction, and inclusion in the Indian school classroom.

The volume is not merely an academic work but an optimistic quest for rendering Indian classrooms inclusive across the country. Some case studies from international contexts could have also been useful to understand how inclusion can be achieved in other plural societies. The challenges that the development of a binary between the private–government school systems, with their multi-layered hierarchies of access that have accentuated in recent decades, presents to inclusion, merits a full chapter and could have been an illuminating addition.

Inclusive classrooms can be the catalysts in building a democratic society by accommodating cross-cutting and overlapping social differences without letting them turn into social divisions, while addressing the emerging demand generation that cuts across various sections of society. The elementary school is the site where children can learn to share the world views of other children belonging to different sections of society, before they are conditioned into a fossilised understanding of the world by conventional education and upbringing. The social, political and economic structures in our deeply stratified society coupled with overlapping social differences have continued to keep the marginalised at the margins, sometimes marginalising them even further. Coupled with this, the Indian education system has continued to perpetuate graded social hierarchies, regional disparity and educational inequality, rather than act as an instrument

that mitigates the structures of inequality, injustice and oppression. This is important as social scientists in India have emphasised caste–class, rural–urban distinctions, but not paid sufficient attention to the sharp divisions produced in society by the multilayered, graded structures inherent in our school education system. The inclusive classrooms of a universal elementary education system can play the social role of inclusion at the level of both school and society across varied contexts, even obfuscating structural constraints to some extent, creating a democratic society through an equitable system of schooling. The volume can serve as a vital resource, envisioning myriad possibilities for creating inclusive classrooms all across the country, in an attempt to make the school system more egalitarian.

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