

part of a child's life and development. Its importance is stressed especially in National Education Policy. Hence, the research quest of the paper is to explore the importance of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Care and Education.

According to John Locke, popular English philosopher, the mind of a new born is like a clean slate without any content (1689). Toddlers acquire knowledge about the world by accumulating information about different objects around them. The first learning experiences of a child, therefore affects his physical and socio-emotional development intensely. The objective of ECCE is to foster the overall development of children and to prepare them to enter the primary stage of basic general education. It is provided by various pre-primary education institutions, Kindergartens, Montessori's, or at special preprimary classes in general education institution. Imparting early education to children between the ages of 3 and 6 is highly beneficial for their overall development. Preschools provide toddlers with a positive learning environment so that they can learn the basic life skills required to face the world with confidence.

Inclusive education (IE) is a new approach towards educating the children with disability and learning difficulties along with normal ones within the same roof. It implies all learners—with or without disabilities being able to learn together through access to common school provisions and community educational setting within an appropriate network of support services. A flexible education system of diverse range of learners is needed to meet these needs. Inclusion is not an experiment to be tested but a value to be followed. All the children whether they are disabled or not, have the right to education as they are the future citizens of the country.

Evidence from around the world proves that pre-primary education can reduce and even prevent achievement gaps between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers, with benefits continuing throughout and beyond education, with an impact on income and reduced inequalities for adults. Children with disabilities must also experience the benefits of quality inclusive pre-primary education that has the potential to protect and enable the "evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities" (CRPD, article

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Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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Early Childhood Care and Education helps in laying down a healthy foundation for the all-round development of the child. It is the platform on which the child extends his thinking to the new areas, exploring new learning, giving a platform to show his abilities and to solve simple practical problems. It also helps them identify their true potential abilities, explore innate skills so that, the child develops his potentiality and utilize his inner desire in positive ways. More and more pre-primary schools are coming up now days. But due to qualitative differences among these schools, an increasing number of pre-primary schools does not justify that readiness to inclusiveness, hence, the problem of giving a holistic development to the young child still remains unsolved. Some children with special needs may require some prior training before they are placed in a regular school. Special educators made available for the purpose can provide such training and thereafter Children with Special Needs may be admitted in mainstream schools. Inclusiveness is discussed in all levels of education, but is least discussed in Early Childhood Care and Education. ECCE is a crucial

3), as well as to ensure their "full and effective participation and inclusion in society" (ibid).

Need and Significance

According to UNESCO, inclusive education is "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education." The goal is that the whole education system will facilitate appropriate learning environments where teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenge and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education approach, learning environments are fostered wherein individual needs are met and every student has an opportunity to succeed.

Inclusive education is the real implementation of basic human right to education. It is not only about attaining the universal access to education, but universal access to a meaningful and purposeful knowledge and learning for all. Although the context in each country and region is unique, we all share common concerns in education regarding justice, equity and peace. Students need to acquire the competencies and appropriate qualifications for life in this ever-changing and increasingly plural and interdependent political and economic landscape of 21st century.

Methodology

As part of my research study, I visited nearly 25 pre-primary institutions in Kozhikode, Malappuram and Palakkad districts in Kerala. I could observe some inclusive classrooms and identify many challenges for inclusion in pre-primary section. Also I conducted interviews with experts in the field. From all these, I listed the challenges for inclusion in ECCE. Through content analysis and through discussion with experts in the field, suggestions to overcome these challenges are given.

Inclusiveness in ECCE

Each child with a disability is unique. Their disability is just one in many factors that shape their lives. But children with different

disabilities often share a common experience: they frequently face stigma that restricts their potential to experience life on an equal basis before it has barely started. The consequences of these stigmas are devastating.

For children with disabilities, exclusion can start from the birth and its impact can last a lifetime. Neglect by leaders at every level, negative perceptions and a lack of inclusive policies are all factors that limit children's participation and deny them a best start in life that every child deserves. The inequality faced by young children with disabilities establishes a pattern that persists as they grow up, ensuring that they are never given the chance to reach their full potential.

A child's early years are not a time they should be left behind. Today, the vital need to support child's development during these early years is widely recognized; by their fifth birthday, a child's brain is 90% developed and a good nutrition, healthcare, protection, play and early learning at this crucial stage are what set children on the right path to the best future possible. Too often, this does not apply to children with disabilities whose experience may contrast sharply with the nurturing care and stimulation that are part of inclusive, quality Early Childhood Development (ECD).

For children with disabilities living in developing countries, these nurturing care and stimulation are often missing, as is the education that would enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge which will enable their full participation in society for the rest of their lives, and to which they have a right. If the children with disabilities are denied the interventions their chances of reaching their full potential is starting to diminish.

It is during this time that the gaps that exclude children with disabilities first appear, opening divisions that will widen as time goes by. It is not by chance that because of discrimination and lack of access to education and other opportunities; more than 80% of children, youth and people with disabilities are left living in poverty (UN 2015 paragraph 23).

If there is any chance of achieving the vision of a world where "all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality", as set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, children

with disabilities need much more support in those very early years. To ensure these children reach their full potential, governments and donors must significantly scale up support in the first five years so that all children have the appropriate interventions they need.

Of all interventions, the single most impactful one is arguably access to equitable and inclusive quality early childhood education. A support that removes the barriers and gives children with disabilities access to quality ECD, early learning and quality pre-primary education opens the way for children with disabilities for the rest of their lives.

Children with disabilities cannot simply be ignored or treated as a problem in their youngest years. Their lives count, their rights matter and so do their dreams and hopes for the future. This briefing will identify some key challenges and recommend measures that government, donors and international agencies can take to help to solve them.

The benefits of pre-primary education are well documented, including its potential to mitigate many disadvantages in school and in life after. Pre-primary is key to tackling "the intertwined challenges of the learning crisis and inequality faced by disadvantaged children as they progress through the education system" (Rose & Zubairi, 2017).

Special Education to Inclusiveness in ECCE

Inclusive Education emphasizes on Equalization of Opportunities for Person with Disability Proclaiming Participation and Equality for all. The term "Special Need Education" (SNE) has come into use as a replacement for the term "Special Education", as the older one was mainly understood to refer the education of those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties. The Statement affirms: "All those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within child centered pedagogy capable of meeting those needs". Moreover, the concept of "Special Need Education" extends beyond those who may be included in handicapped categories to cover all those who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to be likely to impede child's optimal progress. Inclusive

Education aims at integrated development of children with special needs and normal children through the mainstream schooling.

Exclusion does not only refer to the 75 million children for whom access to education is denied or for those who dropped out before completion. It also happens every day to those in schools who are segregated or discriminated due to social condition, ethnic origin, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, or some other individual characteristics or capacities. If policies, contents and teaching approaches are not adapted to the diversity of the students, they will not have the conditions to learn effectively and efficiently the skills that will allow them to be successful in work and life.

Inclusion is not only a preference, it's the law. If a student can succeed in a less restrictive environment (LRE), she/he must be placed there. Students are also not required to be in a single environment for the whole day—sometimes students can be in a more restricted environment for part of the day (e.g. an academic period), but return to a general education group for another part of the day (e.g. physical education).

Important Benefits of Inclusive Education in ECCE

- Parents or caregivers can enroll their disabled child in a community early childhood service, be welcomed, and be able to participate in the center alongside other children and families from their area.
- Individual center policies acknowledge such rights and reflect a philosophy and commitment to inclusion in their practice.
- Children with disabilities have access to the culturally valued knowledge, skills and dispositions that will help them to 'grow up as confident and competent learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge they make a valued contribution to society'.
- Children with disabilities have their learning needs met through quality teaching practices within regular early childhood settings.
- Parents and caregivers are equally included in any decisions made concerning their child.

Approaches to Integrate

School Based Approach: The Government launched the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme in December 1974. It was a Centrally Sponsored Scheme aimed to provide educational opportunities to children with special needs (CWSN) in regular schools and to facilitate their achievement and retention.

Composite Approach: Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED) was another experiment on integrated education in India. In this connection a combined effort of the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) and UNICEF, the PIED came into existence in 1987.

Inclusive Approach: In late 90s (i.e. in 1997) the philosophy of inclusive education is added in District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Moreover, DPEP also addressed core issues related to curriculum especially the child-centered pedagogy. The thrust was on imparting quality education to all disabled children.

Commission Reports

The National Policy on Education, 1986: NPE stresses the need for integrating children with special needs with other groups. It is mentioned in the NPE-1986 "to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with general community as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence." Thereafter Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 was passed by the Parliament in 1992, this act makes it mandatory for every special teacher to be registered by the council. This Act also lays down that every child with disability had the right to be taught by a qualified teacher. In fact, it provided punishment for those teachers who engaged in teaching children with special needs without a license.

National Curriculum Framework, 2005: A policy framework of 2005 envisages inclusion that needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout Indian education system. The participation of all children needs to be ensured in all spheres of their life in and outside the school. Schools need to become centers that prepare children for life and ensure that all children, especially the differently abled children

from marginalized sections, and children in difficult circumstances get the maximum benefit of this critical area of education. Opportunities to display talents should be provided and peer group learning needs to be implemented as the peers are powerful tools in nurturing motivation and involvement among children.

Inclusive Education in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched to achieve the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education. The key objective of SSA is Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) which has three important aspects—access, enrolment and retention of all children in 6-14 years of age. A zero-rejection policy has been adopted under SSA, which ensures that every Child with Special Needs (CWSN), irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability.

The policy covers the following components under education for children with special needs. They are: Early detection and identification, functional and formal assessment, Educational Placement, Aids and appliances, Support services, Teacher training, Resource support, Individual Educational Plan (IEP), Parental training and community mobilization, Planning and management, Strengthening of special schools, Removal of Architectural barriers, Research, Monitoring and evaluation. Girls with disabilities are provided up to Rs.1200/- as per specific proposals, per year. The programmes taken under SSA for inclusive education are identification, functional and formal assessment, appropriate educational placement, preparation of Individualized Educational Plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, resource support, removal of architectural barriers, monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs.

Dewey's Concept on Inclusion

Inclusion is a necessity of life. Dewey (1916) says, "Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested; Education, and education alone, spans the gap." Dewey stressed that students with exceptionalities cannot learn on their own, that they would need support to understand the world into which they have been born. An initial look at Democracy and Education

(1916) would suggest that Dewey may have supported this idea of inclusion as he notes that the "very process of living together educates."

Challenges to Integrate

Lack of experience in an inclusion setting: Some teachers have not been exposed to special needs classrooms and this can be a disadvantage. Educators need to coordinate efforts and understand the needs of the classroom in terms of developing skills and lesson plans.

Lack of experience dealing with severe and profound disabilities: Students with severe and profound disabilities require more adaptation and medical attention than the average student. Teachers must be skilled in handling severe disabilities and create lesson plans based on individual abilities and adhere to dietary needs of the child. Lack of experience can lead to the child not progressing with skills or cause of adverse medical incidents.

Including all students in all activities: Special needs inclusion classrooms must be able to involve its students in all classroom activities. Teachers need to address how the classroom will communicate with each other and encourage participation. If there is a lack of adaptive equipment or adaptive communication and language tools, it makes it difficult for teachers to function as a united classroom.

Educating students with less severe disabilities: When there are children of all abilities in the classroom, both physical and academic, children in the middle can easily fall between the cracks. These children can have learning disabilities, hearing impairments, ADD or language delays to name a few. Providing the right amount of attention and adaptation can be challenging, especially if there is a higher teacher to student ratio.

Dealing with death: Death is difficult for any teacher to explain to their classroom. When you have a special needs inclusive classroom, there may be students with chronic illnesses and teachers may have to deal with the death of a student.

Shortage of teacher aides: Normally, inclusive classrooms have a regular educator and special needs educator. Due to the nature of the classroom and size, it is imperative that there be an appropriate number of teacher aides to assist the teachers with day to day activities.

Teaching compassion to students: Not all students have been exposed to persons with special needs and this becomes a challenge to teachers. Teachers must not tolerate insensitivity and cruelty and teach that all students are to be treated with respect, regardless of ability.

Dealing with parents of "typically developing" students: As some students are not used to dealing with persons with special needs, parents are no exception. Teachers need to convey to parents how the classroom is conducted and that all educational needs will be met.

Individualized lesson plans: Because there are varying abilities in the classroom, teachers can be challenged to address individual academic needs based on ability.

Coordinating therapies: A special needs inclusion classroom needs to be well organized and allow for students to attend therapy sessions. However, this becomes a challenge in planning day to day activities and keeping all students engaged and learning.

How to Overcome these Challenges?

Inclusion involves the work of parents and families. Communication between home and school is essential for ensuring that the student is learning and thriving in the classroom. It should be a consistent, proactive arrangement where information is shared between the family and classroom teachers for the benefit of the child. Depending on the child's needs, daily, weekly or monthly updates are required. Setting up lines of communication such as email, a "communication book" or phone calls, can facilitate an on-going conversation about the child's progress, challenges and needs.

Another important aspect to inclusion is the general education classroom where a student receives the majority of his/her educational needs. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals offer their support, while the classroom teacher makes accommodations and/

or modifications to the curriculum. There may be some need for focussed instruction outside of the classroom, which usually happens during the least disruptive time of day. In addition to curriculum, materials and resources are made accessible to all students. Varying levels of text, visual supports, manipulative and assistive technology are woven into the class program.

Understanding the mechanics of inclusion: Inclusion is like a car. There are many parts under the hood that worked together to make it run smoothly. Most important part is to have the support of school administration and staff. The adults in the building should help set the tone of an inclusive school—from the principal to the bus driver, the playground supervisor and the classroom teacher. They should be friendly, welcoming and make inclusion a priority in all school activities. In fact, many inclusive schools institute a school-wide character education program, in which staffs, students and families participate. This helps reinforce the common goal of inclusion.

Inclusive education is a belief system that values a child's abilities first, not their disabilities. Because it involves the entire school community, there are challenges that can be faced. However, knowledge, discussion, access to resources and support, along with ongoing communication, can help those challenges feel surmountable. Children of all abilities can then truly have equal access to a free and appropriate education.

Conclusion

In early-stage child need to have certain basic skills to get to know the nature, reach existing information; solve the simple problems that they have in their daily life. In this period the children engaged in different activities such as drawing, coloring, clay work, craft work, singing, dancing, play different games and varieties of activities, rhymes, and storytelling and movement activities. Through these pleasurable childhood activities and games, a child is guided to learn simple skills like reading, writing, and numbers that will be benefit for a child to cope up with the pre-primary level of learning. All these build a very colorful and engaged learning atmosphere for kids. In schools, children explore a new world that channels them, booming their school-age learning.

Unfortunately, positive early educational experiences are rare for children with disabilities. If they cannot access inclusive quality pre-primary education, children with disabilities are left behind before their lives have barely started. Children with disabilities must experience the benefits of quality inclusive pre-primary education that has the potential to protect and enable the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities as well as to ensure their full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

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