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# "SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: CAN WESTERN APPROACHES TO TEACHING BE APPLIED WITHIN AN INDIAN CONTEXT?"

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## ABSTRACT

Education Institutions delivering their degree programmes in the emerging economies of Asia so have concerns been expressed that these initiatives may become a form of 'colonialism' seen as offering 'superior' understanding of how universal educational challenges should be addressed. This concern quite rightly demands that future partnerships for the development of professional development courses needs should be built upon secure and established principles of equity and collaboration.

Demands for a more inclusive education system, endorsed through such international agreements as the Salamanca Statement (1994), and more recently through the Millennium Development Goals have led to an increase in training programmes aimed at equipping teachers with the skills to address the needs of a diverse school population. However, in many instances this has resulted in attempts to transport a westernised approach to education to cultural contexts which differ greatly from those in which inclusive schooling has been advanced. The potential for cultural dislocation is clearly in evidence and may prove to be an inhibiting factor rather than a means of promoting the inclusion agenda.

In India as elsewhere, in response to recent moves towards creating more equitable education systems, policy initiatives have been introduced to encourage the development of inclusive education. In particular, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (Government of India 2009) commonly referred to as the RTE has introduced renewed vigour into debates about future provision for previously marginalised populations of children. This legislation which builds upon earlier policies including Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Government of India 2000) with a stated objective of ensuring universal elementary education for children throughout India reflects international trends towards the introduction of policy initiatives for the promotion of improved access to learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 1994; 2000).

The legislation in India has undoubtedly been significant in terms of raising awareness and placing a focus upon special educational needs issues in a country where universal access to schooling remains a challenge. SSA placed an emphasis upon achieving greater access to education for girls, children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and those with disabilities or special educational needs. The legislation can be seen to have had some success through the encouragement of provision of new schools and classrooms and the training of additional teachers in several parts of the country (Singh Kainth 2006). Furthermore, there is

some indication that issues of physical access to buildings and increased awareness of disability issues has resulted in improved access to school for children who would previously have been denied admission (Mehta 2009). This has certainly been significant in contributing to a decrease in the number of children out of school with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reporting that policy changes in India have contributed to the fact that the number of out-of-school children in India fell from 20 million to 4 million between 2002 and 2008 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2009). However, it has been difficult to ensure high levels of awareness of the requirements of SSA and responses to recommendations have varied across the Indian states (Rao 2009). Whilst SSA has undoubtedly achieved a level of success in increasing provision and access to education, there remain many issues associated with progress, retention and attendance that require further investigation in order to ascertain the overall impact of the initiative (Kingdon 2007a; 2007b).

The RTE (Government of India 2009) builds upon the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection and Full Participation Act) (Government of India 1996) which afforded the right to pursue free and compulsory education for children with special educational needs and clearly defines the responsibilities of local authorities, schools, teachers and parents. In addition it defines the functions of the National Commission for Protection of Children's Rights in respect of monitoring the implementation of the Act. Whilst this legislation has been broadly welcomed by organizations representing children from minority groups (Sightsavers 2011), the focus of attention has been upon the allocation of a quota model recently upheld by the Supreme Court, placing a responsibility upon all schools to admit an increased population of children from minorities and discriminated groups (Times of India 2012; The Hindu 2012). Critics of the legislation from groups representing children with disabilities and their families have suggested that there are significant weaknesses in the Act (Alkazi & Rajasree 2012). In particular they point to a clause that indicates that "home-based education" may be the best option for some children with the most complex needs and to the emphasis upon other groups, such as those from scheduled castes with little attention given to those with disabilities. However Human Resource Development Minister Mr Kapil Sibal assured both Parliament and the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) that all categories of disabled children would receive benefits under the RTE Act.

Whilst debates around the RTE have centred upon the interpretation of policy, the practicalities of implementation of the Act for schools in respect of their state of preparedness have received less attention. Discussions of teacher readiness to address the needs of a more diverse population have been limited, though this would seem to be a critical factor in terms of the successful implementation of the legislation. Within the Act there is a section that outlines issues related to teacher qualifications and acknowledges the need to strengthen the provision of professional development. As yet it is impossible to evaluate whether changes in this area are taking place at a rate that will allow for a transition towards the more inclusive forms of schooling advocated.

The training of key professionals, including teachers, to deliver a more inclusive education system has been recognised as a key challenge within India for some time (Das 2001; Mitchell and Desai 2005). Earlier initiatives to increase educational opportunities for children with special educational needs have been seen to stall as a result of inadequate training of teachers to address the needs of learners with disabilities (Jangira 1990). More recently there has been an increased recognition for teacher training in India that not only raises awareness of disability but also

addresses issues of pedagogy, curricular adaptation and the management of classrooms for the fostering of inclusion Naidu (2008). These are undoubtedly areas that could significantly influence the development of more inclusive classrooms within the country, but as yet developments towards the provision of such training appear inconsistent and the concerns expressed by teachers indicate that there is some way to go before confidence levels assure success (Singal 2006; Hodkinson, & Devarakonda 2009).

### **Professional development for inclusive schools**

The literature that discusses the development of inclusive schools indicates the importance of achieving a professional and well trained professional workforce (Tilstone 2003; Loreman, Duppeler & Harvey 2010; Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou 2010). An analysis of discussions in this area suggests that the professional development required needs to address a wide range of issues and certainly to look beyond a narrow focus upon understanding of special educational needs and disability. The perpetuation of medico-deficit models that results from training that is narrowly focused upon diagnosed conditions has been seen by some writers as leading to a model of “expertism” whereby a few individuals acquire skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to a specific need such as dyslexia or autism spectrum disorder. In this approach a few individuals develop expertise but this is seldom disseminated to others and has little impact in developing inclusive classrooms (Garner 2003). By contrast, training that adopts a more holistic approach and places an emphasis upon whole school change is more likely to result in institutional development rather than simply equipping the individual teacher (Skidmore 2004; Florian 2008). Within the literature there are many examples of the provision of professional development that has been focused upon single categories of need or specific disabilities (Laushey., Juane Heflin., Shippen., Alberto., & Fredrick. 2009; Moldavsky., Groenewald., Owen, & Sayal 2012). This focus undoubtedly has an important role in raising awareness and understanding the learning traits of individuals with complex learning needs. However, there is evidence to suggest that a more generic and holistic approach to professional development is required in order to support teacher confidence in addressing a diverse range of needs in the classroom.

Feng Yan (2010; 2012) indicates that in countries where children and young people have long been denied access to schooling it is necessary to examine teacher motivation for working with children described as having special educational needs. In some instances teachers working with such children are afforded low status. Feng Yan suggests that in a cultural environment where children with special educational needs or disabilities have been marginalised and seen as unable to make a social or economic contribution to national development, it has been difficult to motivate teachers to take responsibility for these learners. Negative attitudes and low expectations have dominated school systems and the interest in changing the lives of children with special educational needs has been invested in a few individuals who have high intrinsic motivational factors, possibly emanating from personal experiences. Within an Indian context the research of Parasuram (2006) endorsed the view expressed by Feng Yan that teachers who are most likely to be motivated to want to work with children with special educational needs are likely to have had some personal experience of disability that has affected them or their families. Both Feng Yan and Parasuram believe that a skills based approach to training teachers to work with children with special educational needs is likely to yield limited results until such time as

expectations are raised and attitudes changed by creating a wider awareness of the potential of children and tackling the stereotypes that often surround categorized groups of learners.

In addition to addressing attitudinal and motivational issues teachers need to be encouraged to see how the classroom management procedures that they put into place to address the needs of a diverse population can have benefits for all pupils in a class. Whilst in some instances approaches to enabling teachers to provide differentiated teaching to enable learners with special educational needs to access teaching has focused solely on those individuals, it is apparent that a broader understanding of differentiation can lead to more effective teaching for all (O'Brien & Guiney 2001). Approaches to classroom planning that emphasise the need to address a wide range of needs and abilities, and an emphasis upon assessment that is formative as well as summative are critical elements in ensuring that pupils who experience difficulties with learning are brought in from the margins (Pearson 2009; Florian, Young & Rouse 2010). These are broad issues over which many individual teachers in schools often have limited influence. School managers usually have a directive role that influences the ways in which classrooms are operated and the management of learning through assessment, planning and curriculum delivery is structured. It is therefore likely that whole school approaches to professional development are going to be most influential in effecting change for inclusive education (Ekins & Grimes 2009; Laluevein 2010). However, the reality of much professional development is that it is provided to enthusiastic individuals who are already committed to change and have already identified the need to establish more inclusive practices in their own teaching. The challenge for providers of professional development is therefore to devise courses that support individual teachers in the dissemination of their learning to their colleagues, some of whom may be less enthusiastic, in schools.

### **Professional development for inclusion in an Indian context**

The professional development of teachers in India has been inconsistent in both its availability and quality (Karande., Sholapurwala, & Kulkarni. 2011). Singal (2009) has expressed concerns that an emphasis upon training specialist teachers has had the effect of deskilling mainstream teachers by assuming that responsibility for children with special educational needs is not a major concern of the general teacher but one to be addressed by a resource teacher or by teachers in special schools. This lack of assumed responsibility for developing inclusive practice was also emphasised by Sharma and his colleagues (Sharma., Moore, & Sonawane, 2009) who conducted a study of teacher training and professional development in Pune, the results of which showed that many teachers had negative attitudes and expressed concerns regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classes. However, more experienced teachers undertaking postgraduate studies were seen as likely to have more positive attitudes than those embarking upon an initial course of training. A similar finding was reported by Paterson (1995) and Parasuram (2006) both of whom reported that professionals with higher level qualifications were more likely to have a positive view of disability and a willingness to support change in their education and social conditions. This theme is taken up by Saravanabhavan and Saravanabhavan (2010) whose study of 144 teachers from two mainstream high schools, 38 teachers from two special schools, and 165 pre-service teachers, in their final period of training in a teacher education college in India, revealed that existing patterns of teacher training are having only a limited impact upon raising awareness of special educational needs issues. They also suggest that limited research in this field conducted within an Indian context may be an inhibiting factor in

enabling teachers and students to appreciate what kind of impact teaching approaches for pupils with special educational needs may have within their own school contexts.

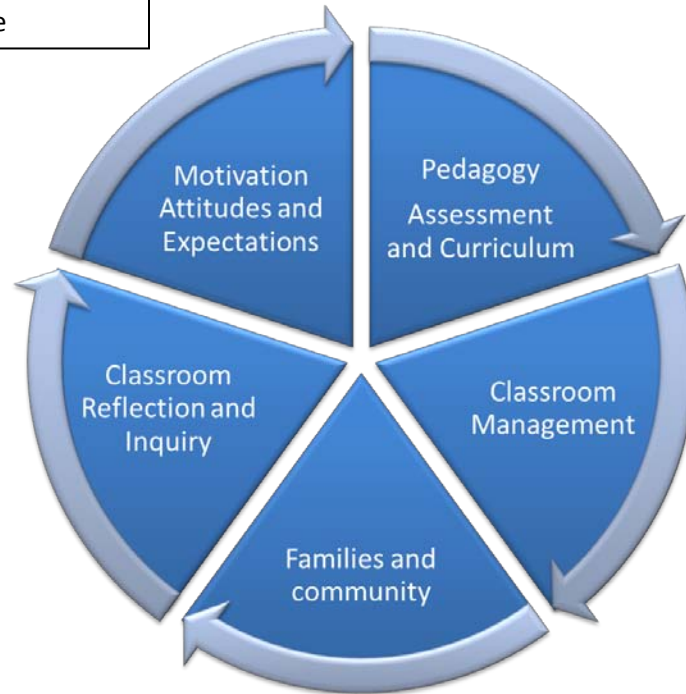
Unnikrishnan (2010) suggests that the development of inclusive education in India will not be achieved through the provision of professional development that focuses solely upon teachers. He advocates increasing involvement of parents and other professionals in order to gain a common language of inclusion and to ensure a more consistent development of procedures and practices in support of children with special educational needs. This may well be an important point of debate within the Indian context where a lack of understanding of disability issues has had a limiting effect upon the expectations of children's potential that has become deep seated within communities (Edwardraj., Mumtaj., Prasad., Kuruvilla, & Jacob 2010).

### **Addressing Challenges in implementing professional development for inclusion**

The need for professional development that could support teachers in assisting the inclusion agenda in India demands an approach that recognises the shortcomings identified by previous research and embraces both content and processes that provide teachers with a broad spectrum of knowledge skills and understanding. Over a three year period tutors from an English university with a well-established tradition of working with teachers to develop inclusive classroom practices worked closely with experienced Indian teaching colleagues who are also involved in professional development to design a post graduate (master's degree) course aimed at teachers in India. Course content was determined through discussions which focused upon the current legislative and policy context within India and also through an analysis of classroom teaching conditions within Indian mainstream schools. The professional learning of teachers is clearly influenced by culture and context (Rose & Garner 2010) and the course developers were concerned to avoid attempts to simply transfer a western model to an Indian situation. In order to avoid possible pitfalls in this area time was spent in Indian schools, talking with teachers and considering the challenges faced in delivering the curriculum and managing classrooms.

This lengthy planning process enabled the course developers to establish a model which seeks to ensure that teacher skills, knowledge and understanding are developed in a real life context and through practical application of ideas in the classroom based upon a sound theoretical framework. The model developed for the course (see figure 1) established the interrelationship between five segments dealing with aspects of school development for inclusion seen as critical within the Indian and wider literature. Each segment provided the foundation for content related to the skills, knowledge and understanding required by teachers not only to become effective in support of a diverse pupil population, but also in the influencing of staff within the schools in which they work. A brief description of course content under each heading indicates how the framework as a whole has been developed to address a wide range of issues within a synthesised model.

Figure 1. Model for MA course Bangalore



Early in the course the students are encouraged to critique *motivations attitudes and expectations* in respect of a diverse pupil population. This is achieved through an analysis of school preparedness to achieve an inclusive culture and examines the reasons behind negative attitudes and low expectations. The presentation of approaches that identify learner strengths and increase understanding of pupil potential is seen as an essential component of learning. This initial work is seen as important in leading into an understanding of how *pedagogy, assessment and the curriculum* can be developed in positive ways in order to facilitate access and learning for a diverse range of learners. Students are encouraged to relate methods of planning and assessment to known pupils with whom they work as well as working with case study pupils provided by course tutors. Assessment is taught as both a formative and summative process and one in which the involvement of pupils, their peers and their parents can play a major role. Students are required to develop policies and procedures which they then critique through a discussion with colleagues in schools and through direct application in their classrooms. Through addressing these areas it is possible to look at aspects of *classroom management*, including the utilisation of resources and the structuring of learning activities with a focus upon all learners, not only those with special educational needs. Students design learning environments within the constraints of their existing resources and evaluate these from the perspectives of both their colleagues and their pupils. Similarly, students are required to formulate plans for pupils that recognise family constraints and seek ways of establishing partnerships with *families and the communities* in which their pupils live.

One approach to teaching has involved grouping students together to play various roles such as teacher, principal, parent and pupil in a school and to consider elements of the curriculum, planning, assessment and classroom management from differing perspectives. The students are

then encouraged to reflect upon learning and to place course content in to the context of application within a created inclusive Indian school. The following extract consists of reflective notes maintained by a tutor and a group of students (in italics) following one of these role play sessions.

*“Students organised themselves into four groups and were invited to set up their own schools and establish a set of core values that reflected their understanding of inclusion. Their values included: cultural oneness, access to all, empowerment, flexibility, acceptance and participation for all and embraced the child, parents, family and the community.*

The school then became the context for developing students’ knowledge and understanding of key concepts related to inclusion and for critically reflecting on the implementation of assessment and pedagogical strategies through the use of case studies. Specific approaches and strategies for individual case study children, for example, structured teaching, and differentiated forms of assessment drew on the child’s strengths and interests, were firmly located within an inclusive classroom context and were shared with the family.

Collaborative learning enabled the students to communicate, justify and defend their principles and practice in a critically reflective but supportive context. One group of students commented on how one session on structured teaching provided:

*‘An insight into structured teaching and the strategies associated with it was truly an enriching experience. The team activity enabled us to critically think and evaluate the do- ability of each task in a real life situation. Applying this methodology for children with SEN through a case study was truly invigorating.’ “*

Students are assessed throughout the course through a process of professional reflection and class based inquiry. They are required to take theoretical models taught during the course and to trial these in classroom situations. This also demands that they involve school colleagues in the evaluation of the materials and resources that they develop, thus engaging them in a professional dialogue that is focused upon establishing a greater understanding of inclusion. At the final stage of the course they conduct a small research study into an aspect of the work of their school from the perspective of a developing model of inclusion. This is reported in a final dissertation. This approach of moving from the theoretical understanding of aspects of inclusion to the practical implementation and evaluation of ideas in real life situations has found favour with students and has encouraged them to take a reflective approach to learning that has influence beyond their own professional development.

The course has attracted students of varying experience from a range of mainstream Indian schools. It is taught through intense blocks of time (5 modules of 40 hours each held over 6 days), with additional face to face tutorial support in India, electronic skype and email based support from the UK and access to an electronic learning platform. All students have full access to a university library and additional local resources.



### **Teacher motivation for professional development and application of learning**

Having developed the course, tutors were interested to know about what motivated teachers to join as students. They were similarly keen to discover to what extent students had been able to apply learning from the course. In order to gain some initial insights into this a survey of the first 15 students to join the course was undertaken. In addition to wishing to develop their skills in managing pupils of diverse needs in mainstream classrooms, several expressed a desire to gain a greater understanding of how children perceive learning and the difficulties that they experience. Some articulated their own personal experiences of special educational needs or disabilities and in recognising the many struggles that children and parents have experienced wished to be in a better position to provide support and improve education in general. In discussing the obstacles that are currently inhibiting the further development of inclusion in India, most perceived negative attitudes on the parts of schools and administrators as presenting a particular challenge. This was often associated with ignorance and a lack of awareness, but was also related to difficulty in obtaining adequate information in order to gain increased understanding of inclusion and the education of children with special educational needs in general.

The practicalities of teaching pupils with special educational needs was a priority for all teachers and they were able to express the ways in which they had been able to apply skills, knowledge and understanding gained on the course.

*“I think it’s given an insight of how important recording is. Keeping a record of the observations that happen, and then maybe review it over a period of time, and how to review it, I think that is very important.”*

*“I’ve started working with these children with learning difficulties in my class and never used to pay attention to them, like only when this learning task was given on the course is when I started working with them to help them.”*

*“For me, in terms of working with children with SEN, you know that whole aspect of not overlooking them in terms of, ‘no, I don’t want to bring attention to their problem’, I stopped doing that, and I sometimes would give them things that were way too simple so that they just wouldn’t struggle with it. And that also I found that, you know, I started challenging students, not to a point that I don’t think they couldn’t do it, challenging them, you know, as far as I thought they could be challenged, at that point, for each specific material.”*

In respect of their own professional practice several teachers expressed the view that their own confidence had increased. This related not only to their own practice as teachers, but also in respect of their ability to make changes in school and begin to influence their colleagues. Modification of personal teaching practices was a consistent theme, and reassuring for the course tutors, was the identification of critical thinking and reflection as a powerful tool for school development identified, by several course participants.

*“Has this course changed the way I teach? Definitely. Better presentation, more prepared. It’s good because it’s given me a lot more questions to think about.”*

*“The reason why I would recommend the course to other teachers is because it helps them examine themselves instead of being copies of the teachers that taught them how to*

*teach. I think it constantly makes you think, it equips you with the skill to concentrate, evaluate yourself."*

*"I think that (the course) is very nice, because I mean, you allow people to think differently. And that's exactly what I want my children, the children I teach, to do. To think differently. It's very important."*

Similarly a recognition that teachers may act as advocates in representing the views of pupils and parents emerged as a positive theme from the data. Some recognised that changing attitudes would continue to present a challenge and recognised that they needed to confront negative perceptions of children, though they still lacked to confidence to confront their colleagues directly.

*"I spoke to a teacher yesterday about ADHD children in her class. I asked her, 'what do you do?' she said, 'all these five children in my class should be taken out', and all these children, right, they have four or five children, they've labelled them to have ADHD, they think they should take all these and put them in one class, and people like me should be teaching them, is what she had to say. I didn't know what to say to her after that, I was just so numb. I can't believe teachers can say things like this, they should be doing courses like this!"*

## CONCLUSIONS

Indian teachers are working hard to embrace changes within the education system. Recent legislation has placed a renewed emphasis upon the development of inclusive schooling and whilst many teachers express concerns for forthcoming change, others are keen to embrace new ideas and to explore the means through which they can become a positive influence for the benefit of a diverse population of learners. The provision of high quality professional development is one important aspect of ensuring a transition towards a more inclusive school system within the country. However, if this is to be effective it will need to ensure a clear relationship between theoretical models of learning and the practicalities associated with curriculum development, planning for a range of needs and classroom management. Opportunities in this area are currently limited and need to be expanded if teachers are to become more confident in managing a broader range of pupil needs in the classroom. Whilst the literature and research into inclusive practices in India is limited, it is important to recognise that importing models from western countries into India without significant modification is unlikely to yield positive results. The establishment of shared partnerships between experienced Indian practitioners and those who have worked for the development of inclusion in other contexts provides one model for moving forward. In the example described within this paper this approach has proven valuable in ensuring a direct link between theory and practice and has been well received by students attending the course. This must be accompanied by an increased commitment towards critical inquiry and research into all aspects of inclusive schooling within India.

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