

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES OF THE HISTORY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is considered one of the greatest reforms in education all over the world. Today many countries are said to have legislations and policies to promote inclusive practices at all levels of education. Issues and needs pertaining to social, political, and economic developments have been better addressed through the lens of Inclusive Education. The paper briefly examines the most significant milestones of the international development of Inclusive Education with special reference to the dynamic evolution of education for people with disabilities in Bhutan, a small Himalayan country in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Development, Disability, Diversity, Education, Exclusion, Inclusion, Policy

People with disabilities in ancient times

The birth of the concept 'Inclusive Education' has obviously underwent series of reforms and evolved over time. Towards the late 18th century, market-ideology has impacted governance, process, and outcomes of education resulting in a more hierarchical, status-ridden, selective system, in which exclusionary policies and practices have become more prominent (Barton, 2004). In education 'social exclusion' the denial of the civil, political, and social rights of citizenship was featured when people with disabilities were historically treated as an oppressed group experiencing indignity, frustration and dehumanization of being inferior (Barton, 2004; Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). According to Kisanji (1999) and Stiker (2019) once in the time of history, people with disabilities were considered as a social threat to contaminate an otherwise pure human species. They were even killed and used as objects of entertainment. In order to safeguard society, people with disabilities were institutionalized in asylums and hospitals providing custodial care only (Kisanji 1999; Chapman et al. 2014).

Era of Special Education

In the 20th century, the notion of special education emerged as a way to provide educational services to people with disabilities. The pivotal role of education to combat practices of social exclusions has been recognized by numerous countries (Ainscow, 2005). Christensen (1996) and Hodkinson, (2015) stated that initially special education was meant for the people with clear physiological disorder. Upon further recognition of the importance of education as the tool for social and economic success, different organizations around the world-initiated

programs to support special education. For example, in 1945, League of Nations adopted universal declaration of human rights for education despite any diverse background of people (Von Bernstorff, 2008). The expansion of special education was paralleled with compulsory education for all and to meet the needs of children with disabilities. (Sailor, 1991). According to Rouse & Florian, (2004) the education policies throughout the 1970s and 1980s stimulated much thinking about children and young people with special educational needs. For example, in 1981, a new special education law was passed in England and Wales, new advisory teams were established for a series of new teacher and school development initiatives designed to help develop whole-school policies for meeting special needs (Rouse & Florian, 1997). However, in Bhutan, modern education system was initiated in 1960's (Wangyal, 2001) and education for persons with disabilities significantly gained national attention in 1973 when only school for persons with visually impaired was built (Chhogyel, 2006; Dorji & Schuelka, 2016). People with disabilities were given education in a separate setting. Such a special educational arrangement for a specific group of people was commonly known as Special Education (Connor & Ferri, 2007); Ministry of education, [MOE], 2011). Theories of special education were mostly based on personal tragedy concept and medical model of disability (Christensen, 1996; Gustavsson, 2004). Disability or disorder of a child was considered inherent characteristics of an individual consequently attributing to defect or inadequacy (Christensen, 1996; Agbenyega, (2003) The assumption of special education was based on humanitarian ideals of equal rights of people with disabilities for education. The children labeled as 'disabled' or 'handicapped' deemed to possess 'special needs' requiring specialized services which was absent in regular schools (Center & Ward, 1987). Moreover, children were assumed to learn better in special schools as they were incompatible in mainstream schools (Reynolds et al., 1987).

The system of special education was both acknowledged and criticized. It is credited for the advocacy of education for a person with a disability and for bridging the gap between professionals and people with disabilities (Barton, 1999). Though special education assumed the principles of humanitarian ideals to respond to the diverse needs of people with disabilities, it faced strident criticisms in the 1980s due to the empirical investigations provided by a number of researchers and scholars (Christensen, 1996). According to Christensen (1996) and Anati (2013). limitations include such as; lack of proper definition and identification of disability, labeled as disabled did not demonstrate detectable evidence of disability, rather than disability deviation students were more deviated in terms of social, cultural, ethnic and economic dimensions, prescribe treatment was found to be grossly inadequate and instructions based on categorical labels was not adequate and effective. Moreover, many studies showed that special education settings diminished rather than enhanced students' education success. (Christensen, 1996). Unfair methods of identification and assessment have led to a disproportionate number of students from ethnic minority groups (Gentry, 2009). For example, in both Europe and North America, black Asian and Latino-American students are over-represented in special schools and programs (Kisanji, 1999). Thus, historically schools are accused of practicing authoritarian models of governance that alienate and legalize segregation without consideration for inclusion (Kisanji, 1999; Carrington, 2008)

Integration is seen as a response to such apparent weakness of inclusive education (Kisanji, 1999). The integration provided a platform for children with disabilities to access regular settings of schools on a timely basis. In UK, due to increasing professional and political interest,

ad hoc local integration schemes were put in place and even made commitment to close segregated special schools and to develop integrated mainstream schools by relocating expertise and facilities (Rouse & Florian, 1997). Similarly, in Bhutan, children with visual impairment were integrated into nearby regular schools, and schools for other disabilities were established (MOE, 2011). However, such practices were not found effective as it retained more ideals of special education. For instance, Thomas & Loxley (2004) argued that 'integration' and 'normalization' just reproduced the special education problems thus showing no signs of decline in exclusionary practices. Lewis (1996) critiqued integration for narrow interpretation without any regard for the quality of that placement (as cited in Rouse & Florian, 1997). An individualized approach to teaching to support integration was not desirable for having imported the practices of special education and 'normalization' by definition itself was a denial of difference contributing to the devaluing of people who are different (Ainscow, 1997). Special education teachers and their pupils felt that they had been hidden away in their special schools and that they were being excluded (UNESCO, 1994). The such scenario in educational development paved a way for Inclusive Education insisting broader scope of education for children with disabilities.

Inclusive Education

Practices of special education were challenged and criticized by many scholars and researchers. 'The pursuit of an inclusive society is concerned with issues of equity and non-discrimination in which the good of all citizens is a central commitment' (Barton, 1999, p. 59). According to Wolfensberger (1993) 'exclusion of some children from any form of education based on an identifiable physical condition and the segregation of others in separate schools and classrooms violated their fundamental human rights' (as cited in Christensen, 1996. p. 68). Such practices instead led to stigmatization and prejudice towards disability. Many advocates of inclusive education have argued that segregation, particularly by placement in special schools, is morally wrong and educationally inefficient. They are convinced that the opportunities for socialization and development offered by mainstream schools represent the best chance for eventual social acceptance of people with disabilities within schools (Rouse & Florian, 1997). Although Bhutan did not have legislation to protect education for disability, the national development philosophy of Gross National Happiness emphasized the inalienable right to education for all Bhutanese for many decades (MOE, 2011).

According to Thomas and Loxley (2004), there was a shift of perspective of disability from a medical/clinical perspective to a social constructionist perspective. People began to think of 'disability' as constructed by society's beliefs and values, not only as an inherent trait in individual person. Such a shift in the approach to education for the disabled changed social and cultural practices. Many legislations, social organizations, and policies were developed to support the concept of inclusive education. In 1990, the 'World Conference on Education for All' held in Jomtien, Thailand acknowledged education, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized groups of learners (Miles & Singal, 2010). Professional advocacy groups in the USA launched Regular Education Initiative (REI) movement and The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH), which called for inclusionary practices in schools ((Kisanji, 1999) Thereafter, Inclusive education progressively gained international attention.

The Salamanca Statement: Framework for Action was “the single, most powerful influence at national and international level for stimulating change in respect of inclusive education, with 92 governments and 25 international organizations signing up to education for all” (Moran, 2007, p. 120). Salamanca Statement was significant in the development of Inclusive Education as it reinforced the ideals and clarified on various issues of practices in the development of inclusive schools at the international level. Likewise, inclusive education is the theme of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education held in Geneva in November 2008 (Acedo, 2008).

The definition of the term ‘Inclusive education’ vary slightly in accordance with the context and policy of a country. (Dorji & Schuelka, 2016; Szumski, et al., 2017). According to Loreman et al. (2005), inclusive education is the inclusion of children with diverse abilities in all aspects of schooling that other children are able to access and enjoy. Similarly, UNESCO (2005) defines it as 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 within and from education (as cited in Operti & Belalcazar, 2008). In Bhutan, Inclusive Education is defined as “the process of valuing, accepting and supporting diversity in schools and ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to learn” (MoE, 2017. p. 4). It is based on the fundamental principle that education in regular schools is the basic right of every child despite of their diverse background. ‘Diversity is regarded as an asset from which various cultures, human interests, skills, abilities, life perspectives and life experiences contribute to the rich fabric of culture that forms a community’ (Keeffe & Carrington, 2007, p. 28). However, the principles of inclusion apply not only to children with disabilities but all (Schaffner et al. 2004). Schools with inclusive practices are effective in combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all (Jennifer & Ingrid, 2002). All European countries now have legislation in place to promote or require inclusion, while the USA effectively has led the way with its PL 94-142 of 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, amended in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and, again, in 1997, to promote ‘whole-school’ approaches to inclusion (Jennifer & Ingrid, 2002, p. 2).

In Bhutan, the Ministry of Education took significant initiatives to promote a both a special and inclusive systems of education. In response to this, the Ministry of Education drafted a separate educational policy for people with disabilities on 15th August 2011 (MOE, 2011). As stated in the Constitution of the country, today Bhutan government provides full support for the education of children with difficulties and has initiated three pilot schools across the country in 2009 to practice inclusionary programs (MOE, 2011). The most recent milestones are; endorsement of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2019 (Disabled People’s Organization of Bhutan. 2023). Development of Standards for Inclusive Education in 2017 (MoE, 2017) implementation of Guidelines on Assessment, Examination, Promotion, and Transition of Students with Disabilities of 2018 (MoE, 2018) and the Ten-Year roadmap of inclusive and special education of Bhutan in 2019 (MoE, 2019). As per the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (2022), currently, there are 39 schools with inclusive educational services including two special institutes (for persons with visually impaired and students with hard of hearing and Deafness). Such measures will have a long-term sustainable impact on the overall advancement of inclusive education efforts in the country.

Though inclusive education has achieved its goals in many countries, it is still an ongoing journey. As 'Full inclusion' requires collective responsibility from various government and non-governmental originations. Some countries still prefer special education to inclusive education because of several reasons like lack of capital and human resources (Jennifer & Ingrid, 2002; Reupert et al., 2010). Similarly, in Bhutan, though government faces some barriers with a lack of professional human resources, budget constraint, attitudes and lack of coordination, follow a twin-track approach to include addressing inequalities in education for all learners while at the same time, acknowledging and providing the specific educational needs of children with disabilities. Like many other countries, Bhutan is a developing country striving to provide high-quality education for people with disabilities and diverse backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

Development of inclusive practices in education has been progressive and rewarding. It grew from a time when there was 'no education' to an era of 'full inclusion' of people with diverse backgrounds in regular schools. Many countries in the world have established enabling environments for inclusion by developing legislations and policies to guide overall practices. Despite numerous obstacles, inclusive education is swiftly gaining international attention and support across the globe. It is a social tool for better future.

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