Understanding Inclusive Education from the Heart

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In the year 1995 I published a special issue of CBR (community-based rehabilitation) Frontline Digest, a quarterly magazine on education of children with disabilities in South Asia. I gave it the title Integrated / inclusive education in South Asia. My friend, Mr. Ture Johnson, after reading this journal wrote, "Integrated and inclusive education are not the same, and these two approaches are built on different rationale and vision." This made me think deeper and deeper in understanding inclusive education.

Once I went to see a school in a village called Thyamagondlu in Karnataka state where I was implementing the Integrated Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme. I went 15 minutes before the school was supposed to open. I sat there watching children coming to school with their books and bags. The head master was a very young man in his early 20s and newly married. He came on his brand new bicycle. As he entered the main door, he asked one of the students to bring the wooden ramp he'd had specially made for his bicycle.

The student promptly brought the ramp and fixed it to the stairs. There were about 5 steps. The head master pushed his cycle using the ramp and neatly parked it near the side of the classroom wall. He saw me and said, "Namasthe madam." Then we started talking about the integration of children with disabilities in village schools. As we were talking, a physically challenged boy around 12 years came to school. His father brought him on his cycle.

The boy entered the school building with great difficulty, as there were five huge steps, which made entry very difficult. Children helped him climb the steps. The head master was also watching this scenario with me. I asked the head master, "You bring your cycle very easily because the ramp was there, but this boy has difficulty in entering, doesn't he?"

The Head master could not see my point immediately and said, "Yes madam that boy has polio, he cannot climb steps." I joked, "Your cycle could also not climb the steps?" He said, "Yes, you are right." I tried to help him think. "But you could lift the cycle by building up a ramp." Then suddenly he realized what I was trying to convey. "Madam I am sorry I thought so much about my cycle - a lifeless object. If only I had left the ramp a little longer, the boy could have entered using the same ramp!!"

In another village school in Varthur, I went to see how the IEDC (Integrated Education of Disabled Child) was functioning. When I went, the teacher was busy in the class. I asked her, "How are you? I come from the CBR project." Immediately she asked all the IED children to stand up. Who are the IED children? A new label? A new brand? This is how the teacher identified children with disabilities as IED children! In another village in Kanakapura, I visited government schools in very remote villages. When I went there I could not see a single child with disability. The school was part of the project where we were implementing IEDC. I asked the teacher where the children were. She said without any hesitation, "They have been sent back home. Their teacher is on leave for a week. So I have asked them to study at home instead of wasting time coming to school!"

These experiences made me think about why IEDC was not successful. It was not successful because it never took the classroom teacher into confidence. It was heavily dependent on resource teachers. It continued to label children as children with special needs.

In IEDC we saw the child as the problem and never looked at the education system as the problem. Therefore whatever we did in IEDC we did outside the education system and focused on 'using the general education system'. We did not think of building IEDC based on the existing education system. In principle, in India, the IEDC planners were in fact convinced about inclusive principles. But, in practice, it ended up as a resource teaching model which 'used' existing schools.

On the whole the IEDC scheme was like Velcro stuck to the mainstream schools. Teachers were still using the terms 'taking classes', 'covering portions', 'finishing syllabus', and the teacher-centred approach was the major barrier to inclusion.

When we asked teachers, "Do you know why you are teaching this concept? Do you know about the curriculum you are using?" Teachers always showed us text books whenever we spoke about the curriculum. When we tried to help them to play with the methodology to reach curricular goals, teachers were so helpless.

They did not understand much about anything other than textbooks. When we asked them to use methodology relevant to the child's environment, they said, "Inspectors will object if we innovate in the classroom!!"

This rigidity in the general education system is the single most significant barrier in providing education to all children. The second barrier is the total lack of community and family involvement. The community almost always referred to 'village schools' as 'government schools'!! It was not 'our village school' - this is most unfortunate. How can primary education progress with the community being such passive partners?

Then we started working on reforms in education at various levels: at the classroom level, at the school level and at community levels. Joyful Inclusion was developed to bring these reforms into schools. One of the major reforms was to involve the communities in school activities so that they no longer remained as government schools.

We had a look at various experiments that have been tried to bring in classroom reforms. One approach that impressed me was the Nali Kali approach in Karnataka. This approach was an inclusive approach which was built on the understanding that:

1. Children learn at different pace.
2. Learning should be child-centred.
3. Schools are multi-grade schools and strategies should take this into account.

We looked at what was missing in Nali Kali which we could add. We saw the curriculum ladder did not take into account children with disabilities. The rungs were too wide. The methodology did not take into account that there are children who cannot see, hear, move and have learning difficulty. Nali Kali is an approach which focused on assisting the teacher to develop activities for the competencies listed in the ladder.

Since the ladder was sometimes difficult we changed the ladder into an achievable one. Nali Kali ladder also did not take into account all the concepts and sub-concepts in the NCERT (National Council for Education Research and Training) curriculum. So we developed CRD (Curriculum Based Criterion Referenced Data) based on NCERT curriculum for wider use of the materials.

I liked the small group teaching techniques, promoting skills that were systematically included in Nali Kali. I also liked the systematic grouping in Nali Kali which is based on learning levels. Nali Kali allows children to learn at their own pace. That is the beauty of it.

We included Montessori and Portage strategies to make it multi-sensory with scientific precision. Portage precision is excellent. There is not even a single word, which is vague in portage - the CRD has all the SOMA features- specific, observable, measurable, and achievable learning outcomes. CRD developed in Joyful Inclusion has this precision. The strategies suggested in the UNESCO Resource Pack were built into the Joyful Inclusion pack.

We used CBR principles to build the community which participates in education. We developed two strategies: Akshara resource center for ALL children; and criterion and illustration based evaluation system. In IEDC we developed exclusive resource centers only for children with disabilities. The underlying principles in establishing resource centers leads to the development of excellent learning materials. These materials are also needed by other children. The resource room concept in IEDC was exclusive. Children did not have a role to play. The approach was so exclusive. In Akshara we removed this barrier and expanded the definition of resource room, which could be used by all children.

As I see Joyful Inclusion accepted, with hesitation, by grassroots level practitioners, I see it as a 'silent reform'. The community sees the miracles 'their children' enjoy in coming to school. The schools are asking for the community's talent and skills. Children with disabilities are attending schools as a matter of right with dignity and grace and the entire community contribute to this change with pride!!! I am sure the day is not too far away when the government education system and policy makers will accept Inclusive Education as a strategy to improve the existing quality of education of ALL children.

Please send your requests for the Joyful Inclusion pack to

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The CBR Network has produced a CD of the Joyful Inclusion pack. They need US$2000 to produce the pack in all the South Asian languages and in English - 6 languages in total.

**Reference:**
**Title:** Understanding Inclusive Education from the Heart
**Author:** Rao, I
**Date:** 2001