Inclusive Education

for enriching the process of learning

Sudhirendar Sharma

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A Perspective Paper

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The purpose of this perspective paper is to provide an overview, connecting the micro with macro, in building a policy perspective on the need and rationale for inclusive education with a bid to improve the dismal picture of education at primary levels at the government schools. It is written with an idea of taking the concerned readers into the domain of inclusive education by not only highlighting the issue in the first place but also by providing insights on how indeed it has been experimented in some schools.

1. Context

In recent years, two reports on how India's destiny is shaped in the class rooms have been published. While providing appalling statistics on educational standards in rural schools, these reports have stirred constructive debate on the subject. One is Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) and the other is National Achievement Survey (NAS). While the former is published by a non-governmental organization Pratham, the latter is released by country's apex educational institution the National Council for Education Research & Training (NCERT).

While ASER has been highlighting the increase in percentage of children getting enrolled in primary schools, both reports lament the continuing decline in quality of education imparted to our children in rural schools. According to ASER, 2013, over 50 per cent of children in standard II cannot read simple every day words in their regional language. As a result 78 per cent of children in standard III and 50 per cent in standard IV cannot read standard II text. More worrying is the fact that the reading level in government schools has declined since 2010.

NAS, Cycle 3 presents a somewhat different statistics on the quality of education. It shows that overall in class 3 only 66 per cent of students could do mathematics problems while 64 per cent have adequate language skills. The difference may have been on account of sampling techniques; however, there is hardly any digression from the core issue of decline in quality of education. Both the reports clearly illustrate the fact that school children in rural schools are not getting the basic learning skills of reading, arithmetic and writing.

Efforts to improve the quality of education are still in its infancy, though. With primary focus hinging on improving the education architecture, the inherent issues related to poor quality of education have yet to be fully understood. The annual Education Development Index (EDI) released by the National University of Education Planning and Administration (NUEPA) is a case in point. Though EDI is comprehensive in data collection and analysis, it focuses on access,
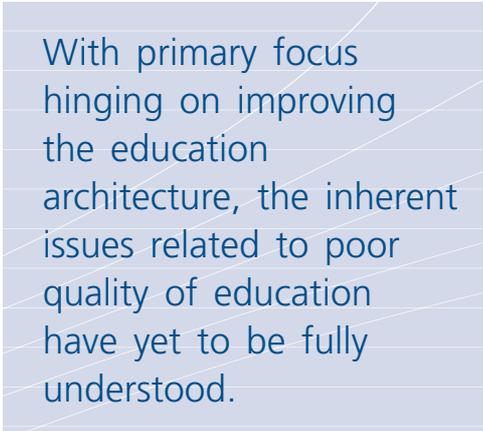
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infrastructure and teachers, but does not convey the serious problems faced by primary education.

Despite the state of primary education in rural schools, policy thrust on primary education has encouraged every parent - literate or illiterate- to get their children enrolled in schools. They know that one possible way to get out of poverty trap is quality education. However, the flip side of the story is that the poor prefer to put their money on private schools, with the mistaken notion that quality education is imparted in those schools only.[1] Statistics reveal that percentage of children attending private schools has gone up from 16.3 in 2005 to 29 in 2013 in rural areas. It is clear that unless quality of primary education in government schools is not addressed, the crises in primary education may not be easily resolved.

2. Issues at stake

Primary education in India, during recent years, has made a remarkable progress in relation to both quantity and diversity. More and more children from historically marginalized groups are joining other children in primary schools, making classrooms diverse and rich in world views. The commendable development is, indeed, a decisive shift from what we had as primary education during the colonial period and after independence. It is no longer a privilege of socially and economically dominant groups to provide education to their children; an increasing number of girls and children from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and ethnic and religious minorities are flocking to the schools to better their life chances.

Notwithstanding these achievements, as already indicated, the schools are

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also plagued by regular absenteeism especially by children from marginalized communities. Besides, a not-so-satisfactory academic performance at schools is compelling children from economically weaker sections in rural areas to enroll in private schools even if these are expensive and far from the neighborhood. All these developments are the result of a number of archaic and dysfunctional pedagogic processes that have been ailing primary education without a judicious and contextual solution. The drop out data provides reflections on the ailing education system in India and Bihar.

With higher drop-out rates, pupils representing socially disadvantaged sections of the society are the worst sufferers. Further analysis of the drop-out rates provide insights on a set of factors, often inter-related, that need to be systematically addressed if the current malaise in the primary education scenario ought to be corrected. These are:

■ **Problematic teaching-learning practices:** The prevalent teaching-learning practices are exclusionary, to say the least, towards the various learning needs and deprivations of children from socially excluded communities. In addition to basing the teaching technique on rote learning, teachers also disregard any specific learning requirement that a child from marginalised community may have. Learners' home and community experiences are not

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[1]There are a number of robust studies that highlight the limitations of private schools. For details see Brighouse et al. (2010).

DROP OUT RATES (in Government schools)

	Classes I-V			Classes V-VIII		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
India-All	28.7	25.1	27.8	40.3	41	40.6
India -SC	29.8	23.1	26.7	46.7	39	43.3
India -ST	37.2	33.9	35.6	54.7	55.9	55.6
Bihar-All	39.2	30.7	35.7	58.5	58.0	58.3
Bihar-SC	40.9	35.9	38.8	64.0	58.6	61.9
Bihar-ST	31.6	19.8	27.1	59.1	47.0	54.8

Source: http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/SES-School_201011_0.pdf

included in the learning process, and they are denied opportunities to construct their own knowledge on the basis of the cognitive awareness and abilities that they have developed as a member of the community.

■ **Hidden curriculum and pedagogic violence:** The apparatus of hidden curriculum works to justify the social privileges and knowledge of the dominant section of the society, and it operates in instilling the conservative norms and value systems through pedagogic violence. More often than not, the prevailing social violence manifests itself through pedagogic violence in the form of various coercive methods including punishments, arbitrary rewards, and sometimes reinforcement of the belief of hereditary based educability.

■ **Subjective interpretation of universal and parochial principles:** The universal principle of equality that merits all children to be treated uniformly deprives children from marginalised communities of special attention and support that they require in order to compete and participate with other children on equal terms. On the contrary, these children's particular social and intellectual characteristics

are singled out and positioned, bracketing and debasing them and their community of origin. In both instances they find themselves in disadvantageous situations due to their caste, gender and/or religious background.

Against this background, there is a need for a perspective building through consultative process that constructs or betters the understanding of inclusive education among relevant stakeholders, including District Institutes for Education & Training (DIET), State Council for Educational Research & Training (SCERT), Bihar Education Project (BEP), State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) and Government B.Ed. training colleges' officials such that the agenda of inclusive education is brought into the centre of the primary education discourse and practice.

The universal principle of equality that merits all children to be treated uniformly deprives children from marginalised communities of special attention

3. Challenges ahead

The issues listed above are of serious concern for educational planners, policymakers and practitioners. In order to realise the aims of inclusive classrooms and enhancement of meaningful school participation and learning level of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, the aims cherished by the major policy documents like the National Curriculum Framework, 2005, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, 2009,and the Right to Compulsory Education Act, 2009 are to be realised and the contemporary government school system would need to develop operational strategies and actions towards it.

To that end, the following actions would need to be initiated at the primary school level to address the major issues related to inclusive education:

■ Develop learning materials/methods to sensitise teachers on diverse cultures, socio-economic conditions and varied learning needs and constraints of children.

■ Develop school curriculum that could relate to the life experiences of children and the socio-cultural and economic contexts in which they live and learn.

■ Use diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts of children as a resource base for enhancing learning achievement for all children.

■ Orient and improve school and classroom practices that lessen children's dependence on home support for their academic performance?

■ Build a context specific teacher development programme that enhances teachers understanding on the social diversity and differentiation in the classrooms.

It will be pertinent to note that not only has 'discrimination' as an issue being recognised in the Right to Education Act, 2009 (Box 1), the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 (see Box 2)) has laid special emphasis on addressing the malaise of discrimination because unfavourable treatment of the child in the classroom has serious impact on his/her learning abilities. Though magnitude and extent of discrimination may vary, it has been observed that the classroom architecture and the teaching-learning experience are critical factors, inter-related to an extent, which play significantly on child's psyche and his/her growth and development.

4. Counting discrimination

To get an in-depth sense on co-relations between socio-economic deprivation and educational discrimination, a study on a sample of 8,903 children studying in standards I to V in government primary and primary with upper primary schools in two districts of Bihar offers revealing insights. The study has been conducted by the Deshkal Society (Deshkal Society, 2012). Some 42 per cent of the sampled children were from households where the father had never been enrolled in a school; with 75 per cent where the mother who had never been to a school (Kumar, 2012). Clearly, a majority of the children were first generation learners belonging to poor households. While as many as 60 per cent of the children came from landless

RTE: Recognizing discrimination in the classroom

Discrimination in our classrooms and school spaces has been recognised under the Right to Education Act. Though it is also among the most difficult to 'prove', discrimination may occur along multiple axes of a child's identity – class, caste, gender, religion, disability, family occupation, region and language, and any combination of these. Discrimination is known to lead to differential and unfavourable treatment of child -manifest in unfavourable seating arrangements, restricted access to facilities including water and mid-day meals, lack of attention and nurturing, restricting participation in activities, selectively giving demeaning work and unwarranted disapproval that may cause harm to a child's growth and development.

The pedagogical consequence of discrimination in classrooms often leads to low learning outcomes. These 'discrimination-induced learning outcomes may be further reinforced by legitimate forms of assessment which then characterize some children as 'slow learners'. The RTE is path breaking in more ways than one. Not only does it make elementary education a fundamental right, but 'discrimination' has been specifically acknowledged and prohibited in a universal social legislation that applies to all citizens.

The Guidelines under section 35(1) of the RTE Act provide steps towards actualizing discrimination-free schooling for all. The overall approach to ending discrimination has to ensure that the lines that differentiate children from each other are bridged through a dialogue rather than an adversarial model. A combination of four distinct approaches to eliminate discrimination from school system has been proposed. These include: i) discuss and understand discrimination; ii) prepare teachers to handle discrimination; iii) redress grievance through dialogue; and iv) statutory prohibition of discrimination & punitive action.

The draft guidelines have been built upon several documents and policy statements, including, Model Rules, Report of the Committee on Implementation of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and the Resultant Revamp of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (April 2010), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan: Framework for Implementation (March 2011), MHRD Guidelines on implementing clause (c) section 8 and 9 of the RTE Act (Oct. 26, 2012)

households, more than half the children came from households where the father was a casual wage labourer (Ibid).

It has been observed that socio-economic background of the household casts an impact on the learning abilities of children. Landlessness has been as much an indicator of economic deprivation as much of the social status. Of all the landless households, 84 per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC), 63 per cent to Scheduled Tribes (ST) and 66 per cent represented Muslim households. Among the upper castes, children from landless households were mere 25 per cent. Coming to occupation of parents, a significant majority of SC, ST and Muslim children were from homes where the father has been a casual wage labourer. In contrast, 40 per cent upper caste children had fathers who were cultivators. Expectedly, a majority of these children also belonged to households wherein their father had never been to a school. In comparison,

only 10 per cent of the upper caste children had illiterate parents.

How do such children, from poor and deprived households, measure up in education? The level of learning of children in primary classes is generally well below the appropriate levels expected from them. According to the ASER (2013) study, out of the more than 11,500 children of standard II less than 30 per cent were able to read simple words. A year later, when the same batch of children was tested in standard III, there was a 10 per cent improvement. Important is to note that children are expected to read simple words from standard 1 onwards. The same study had also reported that only 3 out of 10 children in standard V were able to comfortably and fluently read a standard III text. Thus, even after four years of schooling, close to 70 per cent of the children could not easily navigate through the text meant for standard III children.

Poor learning: The Deshkal Society (2012) study also reported similar results from Bihar. It was found that only about 20 per cent of the standard II children could read simple two letter words while some 37 per cent could not even correctly recognise alphabets. The situation was even worst when children from standard III and IV were taken into count—some 57 per cent in standard III and 37 per cent in standard IV expressed helplessness in correctly reading simple two letter

words. In reality, it should have been the easiest for these children to do. The story doesn't end here. Only one-fourth of standard IV children could read a text appropriate for children two grades below them; and 53 per cent of them could not read a simple paragraph of standard I text (Kumar, 2012). As reported in other studies, notably ASER, 2013, learning levels of such children in mathematics are also very low. In the present study it was found that more than two-third of standard II children had difficulty in recognising two digits numbers, between 11 and 99. It may be hard to believe but such difficulty of recognising two-digits was found in some 28 per cent children of standard IV. It was no surprise when 54 per cent of standard IV children were found unable to correctly solve two-digit subtraction problems with borrowing.

Household impact: The data clearly reveals that the overall learning levels of children in primary classes in government rural schools is much below the appropriate learning levels, however, these learning levels are not independent of the socio-economic conditions to which they belong. In the present study, learning outcomes of children were found to be related to variations in their socio-economic characteristics. Only 11 per cent standard II children whose father had never been to school could comfortably read two-letter words, but the corresponding percentage of children

was 22 whose father had completed his school education (Kumar, 2012). In arithmetic, 32 per cent of standard IV children whose fathers had never been to school were able to solve two-digit subtraction problems with borrowing whereas this proportion for children coming from households where the father was educated up to standard X was as high as 66 per cent (Kumar, 2012).Mother's education, household landownership and occupation of parents have had differential impact too.

Gender gap: The findings also suggest that learning outcomes of children vary by gender and social category. For instance, while 23 per cent of the boys in standard II could read simple two-letter words, only 18 per cent of the girls in same standard were able to do so. Of the number of boys in standard IV, nearly half were able to comfortably read a paragraph of standard I text. The percentage of girls in same standard who could do this was a shade below, at 44 per cent only. Further, while 48 per cent of the boys in standard V could read standard II text of a small story, only 42 per cent of the girls were able to do it comfortably.

Social status: Variations in learning outcomes were also found in both the studies to be associated with social and religious category of the children. In ASER, 2013 study, percentage of children having regular attendance in school was the highest among the general category, followed closely by SC children. A much smaller proportion of OBC and ST children appeared to have regular attendance. Learning outcomes appeared to reflect this difference in attendance. In both standard II and IV, the percentage point improvement over a period of one year was highest among the general and SC children and substantially lower for ST and OBC children. Attendance and learning
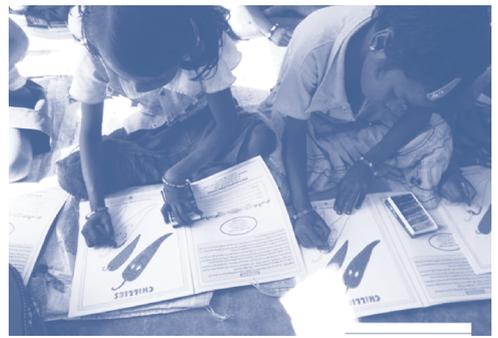
outcome data for the sample as a whole also indicates substantial differences between children from Muslim families and those from other religious backgrounds. However, enormous variations were found across the five states that constituted the study. Perhaps, differences in the relative socio-economic position of social categories in different states could account for these variations.

The study by Deshkal Society (2012) found a systematic pattern in variations in learning level of children according to their social category. Upper caste children had the highest learning levels followed by OBC and the Muslim children, while the SC and ST children were at the bottom. For instance, the percentages of ST, SC, Muslim, OBC and upper caste children in standard II who could fluently read simple two-letter words were 8, 15, 18, 29 and 34 per cent respectively; while 63 per cent of upper caste children and 58 per cent of OBC children in standard IV were able to read a simple paragraph of standard I text; only 45 per cent of Muslim children, 35 per cent of SC children and 30 per cent of ST children were able to do so comfortably. Similarly, the proportion of children from different social categories in standard V who could read a small story from standard II text were 64 per cent for upper caste, 48 per cent for OBC, 43 per cent for Muslim, 37 per cent for SC and 33 per cent for ST.

Net impact: From this discussion it is clear that while elementary education

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in India has achieved considerable progress in terms of enrolment of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, the performance of government primary schools, particularly in rural areas, has been dismal in ensuring even a minimum level of learning among these children. The significant growth in the number of private schools in rural and semi-urban area points to the lack of trust among parents to the quality of education being provided by government schools. Recent ethnographic studies (See PROB report, 1999; Geeta B. Nambissan, 2001; Jean Dreze and Harish Gazdar, 1999; Lal Bahadur Oja, 2003; M. Murali Krishnan, 2012) indicate that the school curriculum and teaching-learning practices and processes are not sensitive towards addressing the learning needs and concerns of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and that discriminatory practice towards children from certain socio-economic backgrounds still operate in classroom practices and processes. Children are often perceived as having ascribed learning potential and abilities based on their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. While the schools claim in public discourse that they treat all children as 'equal', the notion is based on the ideology of caste hierarchy which further denies children their individual identity and strengths as well

as their identities and consciousness formed as part of growing up as members of collectives.

5. Understanding discrimination

Though it has been quantified only recently, the issue of discrimination in education has been with us for a long time. For over sixty years researchers in the field of education have tried to grapple with inequality in access to schools and the right to non-discrimination in the choice of schools. While there have been a lot of research studies (see for example Ojha, Lal Bahadur, 2003; Majumdar, Manabi and Jos, Mooij, 2011) done on the subject, given the present situation it is right to assume that 'inclusive' education will remain an important area of 'research' as well as 'action' in the coming years. In the context of this perspective paper, an attempt has been made to focus on and understand the basic problems that beset our schools:

- classroom environment and learning achievement,
- low retention and high dropouts,
- indifferent attitudes of the parents/ communities

Classroom environment: Poverty is clearly present in village schools – from the infrastructure to teaching-learning materials and from presence-absence of certain kinds of children to the presence of teachers. Even within an already impoverished school, it has been commonly observed that the teacher favors good students and neglects the so-called slow learners'. Under such a situation, poor and uneducated parents are in no position to hold malperforming schools to account. The bottom line is that after spending five to eight years in school, children are rarely better off in their learning

NCF: Learning to respond to new situations

The National Curriculum Framework is based on the constitutional vision of India as a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society with the broad aim of education to include independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others' well-being and feelings, learning to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner, predisposition towards participation in democratic processes, and the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change. For teaching to serve as a means of strengthening our democratic way of life, it must respond to the presence of first generation school-goers,

The fact that learning has become a source of burden and stress on children and their parents is an evidence of a deep distortion in educational aims and quality. To correct this distortion, the NCF proposes five guiding principles for curriculum development: (i) connecting knowledge to life outside the school; (ii) ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods; (iii) enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks; (iv) making examinations more flexible and integrating them with classroom life; and (v) nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country.

The fact that knowledge is constructed by the child implies that curricula, syllabi and textbooks should enable the teacher in organising classroom experiences in consonance with the child's nature and environment, and thus providing opportunities for all children. Teaching should aim at enhancing children's natural desire and strategies to learn. Knowledge needs to be distinguished from information, and teaching needs to be seen as a professional activity, not as coaching for memorisation or as transmission of facts. Activity is the heart of the child's attempt to make sense of the world around him/her. Therefore, every resource must be deployed to enable children to express themselves, handle objects, explore their natural and social milieu, and to grow up healthy.

The NCF recommends the softening of subject boundaries so that children can get a taste of integrated knowledge and the joy of understanding. In addition, plurality of textbooks and other material, which could incorporate local knowledge and traditional skills, and a stimulating school environment that responds to the child's home and community environment, are also suggested. In language, a renewed attempt to implement the three-language formula is suggested, along with an emphasis on the recognition of children's mother tongues, including tribal languages, as the best medium of education. This is possible only if learning builds on sound language pedagogy in the mother tongue.

The child's success at school depends on nutrition and well-planned physical activity programmes, hence resources and school time must be deployed for the strengthening of the midday meal programme. Special efforts are needed to ensure that girls receive as much attention in health and physical education programmes as boys from the pre-school stage upwards.

The school ethos is discussed as a dimension of the curriculum as it predisposes the child towards the aims of education and strategies of learning necessary for success at school. As a resource, school time needs to be planned in a flexible manner. Locally planned and flexible school calendars and time tables which permit time slots of different lengths required for different kinds of activities, such as project work and outdoor excursions to natural and heritage sites, are recommended. Efforts are required for preparing more learning resources for children, especially books and reference materials in regional languages, for school and teacher reference libraries, and for access to interactive rather than disseminative technologies.

Examination reforms constitute the most important systemic measure to be taken for curricular renewal and to find a remedy for the growing problem of psychological pressure that children and their parents feel. Specific measures include changing the typology of the question paper so that reasoning and creative abilities replace memorisation as the basis of evaluation, and integration of examinations with classroom life by encouraging transparency and internal assessment.

The NCF recommends partnerships between the school system and other civil society groups, including non-governmental organisations and teacher organisations. The innovative experiences already available should be mainstreamed, and awareness of the challenges implied in the Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) should become a subject of wide-ranging cooperation between the state and all agencies concerned about children.

abilities. As a result, children from diverse poverty and social situations end up receiving little by way of education in the schools.

Far from creating a better environment for teaching-learning in the classrooms, teachers question the educability of children belonging to poor households, uneducated parents and deprived communities. The tragedy is that many children often internalize

this view and begin to believe that they cannot learn. The relationship between teachers and the children has remained a highly debated issue. Notwithstanding the introduction of new child-centered pedagogies, the situation on the ground has not changed much. Several studies have argued that caste and gender play themselves out in teacher-children relationship (For details see Majumdar and Mooij, 2011; and Keddie, 2012). Undoubtedly, discrimination in the classroom has significant impact on learning outcomes.

Low retention: It is well-acknowledged fact that retention or dropout-ism in schools pertains mostly to children from economically weaker sections. Push and pull factors of economy impact these

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sections the most. In addition to other factors, notably quality of education, it is the children parents' that influence retention or dropout rates in schools. The quantity and proximity of schooling is closely related to economic growth or its failures. Wide differences exist between growth rates and the levels of household poverty. In this context it is pertinent to assess the efficacy of development schemes as these relate to school education, retention and drop out. This is an area that warrants context-specific research and analysis.

How and what engages children in the classroom is key to holding them back in the school? In reality, however, teachers actively ignore a substantial proportion of children – the so-called backbenchers, frequent latecomers and absentees. By relating primarily to the regular and the best students, convenient conditions get created for children to dropout. The tragedy is that many teachers question the educability of some children and as a result do not put in the required work to enable children from poverty situations to cope up with the demands of formal education. Since the in-service training regime does not even touch this issue,the teaching-learning process to address discrimination remains inadequately understood and thus remains one of the more formidable challenges.

Indifferent parents: It has been accepted that teacher skills may only be one of the many factors contributing to learning abilities and retention of children. Other completely different set of factors: namely, how much kids have learned from their parents, how hard they work at home, and whether the parents have instilled an appetite for education play an equally significant role. The core of the argument is that children spend only about 22 percent of their time in schools. Quite often, parents do not acknowledge this fact and hold the school responsible for both the quality of education as well as the learning abilities of their children. Parent-teacher meetings are replete with complaints being traded by both the sides.

There is a growing belief that the 'home environment of the children is an impediment to education rather than something that may assist them' and this belief works against children from families in poverty. The belief works like a double-edged sword. While teachers transfer the onus of poor learning abilities of such children on their home environment, parents with no voice or power are compelled to curse their socio-economic conditions in return. Children are trapped amidst

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this indifference, both at the school as well as at home. In the context of improving education and reducing drop-outs, addressing parental/community indifference should hold special significance.

6. Parent-Teacher Faceoff

To get a sense of the ground realities in the context of this paper, parents and teachers were interviewed at greater length in selected villages and corresponding schools in the districts of Darbhanga, Gaya, Kishanganj and Bhojpur in Bihar. Through a series of questions, an attempt has been made to sense respondent's perspective on factors that may impinge on inclusive education. While both the parents and teachers have stressed on lack of physical infrastructure as the key issue, it clear reflects that quality of education and inclusivity are areas that are as yet distanced from local realities. For the sake of easy reading, key messages emanating from these interviews are presented in the following pages.

Though consistent in their responses, the interviews do point towards glaring inadequacies in school infrastructure, inadequate number of qualified teachers, and a somewhat mixed response to the functioning of School

Management Committee and the conduct of Parent-Teacher meetings. Given the socio-economic context, there is need for improvement in teaching-learning experiences, as also greater involvement of parents in school affairs. The space and scope for making the schools effective vehicles of education has yet to be fully exploited.

7. Addressing discrimination

Possibilities for improving classroom architecture and enhancing teaching-learning practices do exist across many innovative schools across the country.

Presented here are short cases of five schools which have not only democratized teaching-learning practices but have adopted methods of differential learning as well as peer learning where every child gets involved in learning process.

They adopt a method where children initiate the process of their own learning and the teachers play the role of key facilitators for the entire learning spectrum. Besides, these experimental schools have also developed resource materials in terms of Teaching Learning Material, toolkit for teachers and documentation of the whole process on inclusive education.

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Village: Maniyari, Block- Bahadurpur, District-Darbhanga

Parent: Landless and occasional migrant, Mahesh Ram, is a proud father of five children, 3 girls and 2 boys, who are all attending village school. With both the parents illiterate, which they profoundly regret, there is not much they can do to inspire their children. Mahesh laments the lack of physical infrastructure in the school (toilets are non-functional) as well as fewer teachers. How can 3 teachers manage 350 students, with significant time lost in organizing mid-day meals. Though parent-teacher meetings are held regularly, there is hardly any follow-up by the school on the decisions made.

Teacher: Headmaster Jeebachh Paswan regrets poor infrastructure in the school but claims to be using teaching-learning materials in the classrooms. He is of the opinion that backbenchers are shy students who need extra care but could not specify what he meant by it. Parents are tutored to assist in enhancing learning abilities at home but on account of poor economic background, they have their limitations. Paswan accepts the fact that on account of better facilities and disciplined staff, private schools are imparting better education. Children educability is genetic in nature, influenced by the environment to which they belong.

Village: Dakhingaon, Block-Wazirganj, District-Gaya

Parent: Manoj Kumar is educated and has landed property in the village, and his son and daughter go to school. Kumar feels that the headmistress has not been effective and the teachers are not serious. Though he feels that an educated community can influence the teaching-learning in the school, but he hasn't heard about the School Management Committee. To him, mid-day meals distract children from their primary focus on studies. Kumar is caring about his children, keeps track of their progress but wonders if any parent-teacher meeting has ever been held. The quality of education in the school is not up to the mark

Teacher: A school should be well equipped with a good teaching environment, says headmistress Kamini, but her school is poor in infrastructure and is located in a noisy neighborhood. Single classroom is what she prefers as students get proper attention. Though parent-teacher meetings are regularly held, some parents find it difficult to attend as they lose their daily wages. Quite often, in such meetings parents are keener on entitlements to their ward than about the actual issues of classroom transaction. Within our limitations, the school does its best to encourage poor parents to inspire their children to attend the classes regularly, under hygienic conditions.

Village: Rampur, Block-Tedagachh, District-Kishanganj

Parent: Illiterate he is but has landed property in the village to barely make both ends meet for his wife and six children. Jamebul's is one of the 20-odd muslim households in the village. Had both the parents been educated, they could have effectively followed the education of their children. It is the mother who tracks children education, meets with teachers and attends parent-teacher meetings. They are neither happy with the quality of education nor the quality of mid-day meals. On both accounts, nothing much has changed. Jamebul's eldest son was forced to migrate for supporting the family.

Teacher: Rajendra Prasad Mandal heads the village school and is proud of its enrollment record though infrastructure facilities in the school have been inadequate. Weak students get to sit in the front benches such that teachers can attend to their specific needs. Community takes less interest in school though the school is meant for the community. School Management Committee is a welcome step but there should be a limit to how much it can interfere. Mid-day meal program does enhance enrollment but cuts down on quality time meant for teaching. A better interaction between parents and the school can improve the quality of education.

Village: Doghara, Block-Bihiya, District-Bhojpur.

Parent: Having no access to education, Gupteswar and his wife, parents of four children constantly worry about the education of their children. It is difficult for them to assist the children in their education or homework. However, they expect the school, teachers and the headmaster to be concerned, affectionate of the needs of their children, and also to provide quality education. The eldest son of the family has left education and migrated to Delhi in search of livelihood.

Teacher: Ms. Dayamanti Roy is proud of her school as it maintains proper time schedule and imparts quality education under hygienic conditions. The school does not encourage more than 30-minutes of home work which the children can complete on their own. Though private schools are flourishing all across, the teachers in government schools are better qualified and with right guidance these can deliver the best. Communities and parents can play significant role in improvement quality education by engaging appropriately with the teachers at school and with children at home.

8. The Way Forward

Strengthening philosophy of inclusive education: The foregoing discussions clearly indicate that 'inclusive learning' is indeed possible in a classroom. This notion of a classroom can accommodate all students and there can be as many curriculums as there are students – inclusive of voices of the diverse social and cultural people, especially those who have been marginalized. Such curriculums, in many languages and in different styles and rhythms of

Zero drop-out school

The students arrive early at school, most walking 1-2 km from their home. The first session of the day is 'culture', where children practise dance, including rotating thalis (plates) on their fingertips and balancing pots on their heads whilst swinging to the beat. They also engage in craft, drawing, painting, and singing songs about rivers, mountains and the strength of people.

Agriculture and horticulture constitute a major part of the curriculum. Students are encouraged to plant fruit trees on the campus, including apricot, guava, pomegranate and other smaller plants. An annual tree-planting day is organised to mark the martyrdom of Sridev Suman, a well-known Garhwali freedom fighter.

Since all the students come from agricultural families and are expected to graze cattle, milk cows, cut fodder, sow or weed the fields, fetch water and do other household chores, they have tremendous first-hand knowledge about their environment and ecology. This is used within the formal learning space in interactive ways to build on the experiential information they possess. 'We use methods that encourage learning with creativity,' says Arun Panwar who teaches mathematics at Swajan Siksha Samiti. At the end of each day, an intensive session of review, discussion and presentations is held in the assembly hall which is lined with large display boards filled with stories, photographs and colourful drawings.

Prior to the establishment of Swajan Siksha Samiti, there was no school in Ghati, a hamlet consisting of just 10 houses, located two hours away from the tourist town of Mussoorie in Uttarakhand. Ghati is surrounded by five villages -- Thapla, Chamasari, Gaid, Bichu and Garkhet. Each has its own government primary school and yet Swajan Siksha Samiti sees an influx of students from these villages. Government education schemes to have a poor track record in the region.

Considering that a majority of children enrolled in schools here are first-generation learners, there is an urgent need to convince parents of the value of formal schooling. This is possible only if quality of education is ensured. And so, setting up Swajan Siksha Samiti proved to be a huge challenge for Sanjay Rawat and Vikram Singh. Both had training in alternative educational practices and were motivated to introduce such a method of education in the school.

Swajan Siksha Samiti is as committed to reviving and retaining local culture as it is to teaching its students formal subjects. This has made it popular, and today, students are invited to take part in functions across the state. Despite being illiterate themselves, parents want their children to learn well and are extremely satisfied with the school. Mamta Panwar from Takarna village says: 'I've sent all my three children to Swajan Siksha Samiti. There, they actually learn and return home with a smile on their faces! We never had that from a government school!' While children often drop out of the nearby government schools, a major achievement of Swajan Siksha Samiti has been its zero drop out. Of its 97 enrolled students, 60 come from BPL families. A small monthly fee is charged -- Rs 50 per girl, and Rs 100 per boy. The school is currently fighting the prejudice of imparting quality education to boys only, as most households prefer sending girls to government schools only.

Where classroom is a miniature world

Started in 1990, Vidyashram School in Varanasi has 272 students and 17 teachers; its nursery section is located 14 km away on the banks of Ganges in village Betawar and has 57 children. Though the classes have children from the poorest and most marginalized sections of the society, the school has developed into a crucial site for the production of equality. To erase the idea of haves and have-nots, school uniform and stationary is provided by the school alongside a check on the pocket money each student can carry. Children sit on islands of chairs facing each other. Each classroom has floor seating arrangement, providing a continuum with home culture, with the children taking turn to sit at the desks as well as on the floor. On top of it, child-centred routines encourage free working of the imagination.

The school has done away with the bogey of shortage of time by designing a day with no bells. However, the children are trained to complete work and to respect the clock as a virtue in itself and not at the service of the timetable. The feature that makes Vidyashram stand out is the realization among children that classroom is not only their space but that they have the authority to organize it. Since the school has fewer classrooms, different classes have to share the same space. The shortage of space has been creatively utilised to encourage children to clean their classrooms before handing it over to the incoming class. The incoming children lay out their classroom as per their choice, reflecting as much a sense of authority as much as responsibility.

'Orienting parents to the concepts of inclusive classroom and interactive learning is a big challenge,' say the teachers. It involves frequent workshops with parents to share the concept of 'no tuition' and 'no homework', because no homework indicates that the school lacks discipline and its teaching standards are poor. Consequently, it puts huge demands on the part of teachers to give attention to every single child in an inclusive manner. Teacher training, both formal as well as on-the-job, is an important part. With teachers trained on pedagogical work, the approach at the school has been to teach everyone through a combination of science, arts and civics. The idea has been to provide multi-dimensional perspectives on each aspect of learning. Worksheets and curriculum based on such premise provides huge potential for equality between classes and communities.

At Vidyashram, teachers are at the heart of change and are hence taught to think differently about themselves, their history and their world. Instead of ignoring the caste, class, gender and cultural categories, they read, think and discuss these ideas from carefully designed curricula for adults, gleaned from the best of writings on these subjects. A rich library backs up the emerging needs of both the teachers and the children. Another aspect of producing change in teachers is institutional which the school provides by creating an environment for professionalism, which helps teachers become leaders in producing inclusivity and excellence in their classrooms. Through such efforts, Vidyashram has demonstrated over last two decades that inclusivity can indeed be achieved

Noise is a form of conversation

Loreto Day School at Sealdah is a large English medium school for girls, with as many as 1,500 enrolled students at any given time. Though the school was established in 1857, it shot into fame subsequent to Sister Cyril taking over as its Principal in 1979. In a caste and status-conscious society, the school has pioneered an educational process where children from both 'have' and 'have-not' families play and study together as equals. The students have been exposed to real-life experiences that reinforce values of tolerance, inclusiveness, responsibility, sensitivity and compassion.

Given its current strength of students, between class-breaks during any day, the atmosphere is both eclectic and noisy. 'Noise is a form of conversation and the way to exchange and to learn,' clarifies a teacher. Conversation is one amongst much stimulation which provides outlets for the child's creative talent. Loreto challenges a fixed view of school and its structures by seeking to live out a set of values which continually challenges parents, teachers and pupils of the school to build an outward looking community, to be flexible, and to live in simplicity. Loreto applies practical methods of teaching, linking everything to each other. For instance, during monsoon season, water is the basis of lessons e.g., volume of water, surface area etc. When things are linked together, they make much more sense to the children.

Since its beginning, Loreto has achieved remarkable progress as an educational institution of high repute with respective principals managing the school through often complex and difficult times. While receiving acclaim as a school for privileged young ladies, it has also helped many poor girls acquire an otherwise inaccessible education. The unique methods tested at Loreto have not only been well documented but have been internationally accepted too.

Loreto has been able to create equal opportunity for all children by training teachers and making relevant reading materials for different groups. The philosophical underpinning for such an approach is that every child is a child and has the same right to flourish as a complete human being. It is noticeable that at Loreto a child's identity is considered her central identity – her gender, caste, religion, economic strata are all irrelevant. This forms the basis that all children have the innate ability to learn.

In its phenomenal work, Loreto has not only challenged but demolished many myths. The first myth it challenges relates to the fact that only a well off child has the right to education. In fact, every child has the basic right to education which must be protected. The second myth that the poor child will not cope with the English medium is irrelevant as long as quality of teaching gets ensured. The third myth that the poor child will pull down standards of the school has been proven wrong at Loreto through innumerable cases. The fourth myth that a good academic result is the sign of a good school is presumptuous. Conversely, a good school should be 'good news' for all – not just the elite who can afford fees. Loreto has demonstrated how one institution can influence policy in the state and in the country.

Taking care of head, heart and hands

With a teacher-student ratio of 1:15, Anand Niketan School at Sewagram offers value-based learning based on Gandhian principles to pre-school and primary children. In a child-friendly learning environment, learning begins with addressing many curiosities of a young mind. From cleaning to gardening and from spinning to stitching, children learn many facets of art and science that shape their minds. Activity oriented learning helps children experience freedom, which helps them to discipline themselves and frame rules for themselves. The children are exposed to real-life experiences that reinforce values of non-violence, co-operation, justice, harmony and sustainability.

Anand Niketan is a Nai Talim School whose philosophical foundation rests on love, compassion and dignity of labour. Art and Craft provide hands-eye coordination as much as nurturing a way of learning. Mother tongue or regional language remains the medium of instruction. The school strikes a balance between individual and group activity without creating any competition and ranking system. Every child, the school feels, is capable of thoughtful action in his/her own way. Parents are encouraged to contribute to school activities. The most significant aspect is that children not only clean their classrooms but urinals and toilets within the school premises. Young minds understand the value of hygiene in school itself and their parents support such hands-on experience!

Curiosity enhances children's learning

Patna-based Association for Promotion of Creative Learning's (APCL) innovations for quality education is based on its belief that each child has a unique learning style, and needs a unique learning environment, that learning is best in a joyful atmosphere with less competition, more cooperation. Upholding this belief the teaching learning methodology at APCL emphasizes on aiding the natural learning process of each child. It also aims at developing core creative learning competencies of observation, concentration, memory, thinking, imagination, expression/communication, and emotional control.

Learning and mastering the method of learning is the focus of APCL. It is believed at APCL that teaching is effective only if it leads to self-learning. Children should be given opportunity to master the art of learning.

APCL also works towards lessening individual competition and promote group competition. Games are used to develop creativity while providing good opportunity to perform an activity in an atmosphere of joy.

Based on Yogic methods of learning, APCL has developed unique Visualization Exercises to develop processes of Mental Image Making. These exercises help learners to develop concentration, memory and imagination. It further helps them to have better emotional control, which is now considered to be so vital for achieving success in life.

Inquisitiveness and curiosity holds the key to creative learning. A child is by birth inquisitive. APCL has found that learning the art of questioning may provide a forum to such curiosity development plan. APCL believes that it is not

only important to know the art of answering (as is being done in the normal schools today), it is rather more important to master the art of questioning. Questioning guides the path of thinking- both convergent and divergent and thus gives direction to curiosity.

As the learning through activities is most durable, APCL has evolved a system of learning, which involves learning through different kinds of activities although books are important agents for transfer of knowledge, they are not taken to be the only agents of such transfer. Other materials are also used to ignite the flare of learning. Investigative methods are be used to promote inquisitiveness. Even Science and Mathematics are taught through activities involving joy and exploration.

learning, can be given time and space in classroom teaching. Every student learns in different ways with languages, rhythms and epistemologies. It is the recognition of this epistemological diversity that is inclusive to all learners.

The beginning of inclusive education is learning to listen to the diversity of voices, perspectives and epistemologies that say 'there are thousand alternatives'. This is crucial if we are to recover the critical and radical role of education. These vernacular classrooms are outside the four walls of classrooms in schools. What is learnable from the vernacular classrooms is that 'studentship' is as important as making classrooms 'inclusive'. To overcome marginalization it is not necessary to become part of the neo-liberal mainstream; instead to become part of the vernacular frontier that begins where the 'word' returns frustrated. At this frontier, begins a studentship that works towards the 'de-alphabetization' of the popular mind as well as of epistemologies.

Given their trainings, teachers are only redressal mechanisms; educationally, they are supposed to be child-centric. Teachers are trained, at most, to empathize with marginalized children and not engage them that tantamount to, not inclusion, but exclusion of the child. Text books are standardized which makes them exclusive. They have lost touch with social realities of class,

> Every student learns in different ways with languages, rhythms and epistemologies.

caste and gender. They remain only transactions in terms of examinations. A standard III text book recounts how an 'untouchable' child studied with Gandhi in schools. At that age the child is unable to grasp what untouchable is. Inclusive education processes ought to help a child identify his/her social location and begin ways of negotiating it.

Realizing inclusive education on the ground: Pre-service training is an ideal time to work with young teachers around issues of diversity and inclusion in the classroom. It is important to ensure that teachers develop an understanding of practices

> Teachers are trained, at most, to empathize with marginalized children and not engage them that tantamount to, not inclusion, but exclusion of the child.

that can involve and engage children as active learners. For ensuring that all students can learn to read well in early grades, it is possible to promote teaching-learning strategies that provide opportunities for scaffolding, regular practice and revision. Learning skills and 'deep comprehension' need to be stressed instead of mere repetition and memorization. The entry point for such discussion with teachers is 'good teaching-learning' strategies and not issues of bias or discrimination. It is important for teachers to recognize that many children come from diverse lingual and religious backgrounds, and have different learning needs and some differentiated instruction is needed in every classroom. In order to assess varied learning requirements of such children and to implement informed pedagogic techniques teachers need their entire attention on academic activities, and will be immensely helped

if they are spared of any non-academic assignments and distractions. Only then teachers can appreciate, learn and achieve high-end academic goals of inclusive education.

Beyond the four walls of schools, higher echelon of block and district education officials need to be sensitized on the tenets and goals of inclusive education. Customized training programmes should be devised and implemented so that they understand and support schools in their endeavour to realize the aims of inclusive education. Similar tailored training and sensitization programmes are very much needed for community members, especially members of SMCs, because inclusive education begins within the setting of community discourse, and contributes immensely to children' acquired experiential learning that play a critical role in reinforcing or undermining the agenda of inclusive education.

Pre-service training is an ideal time to work with young teachers around issues of diversity and inclusion in the classroom.

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DESHKAL SOCIETY

Deshkal Society, since 1995, has initiated and innovated research, advocacy and grassroots interventions to further the inclusion and equity of marginalised communities in a democratised mainstream society. Issues of social exclusion/ inclusion, marginality and diversity in education, land rights and entitlements, and culture and sustainable livelihoods are the main focus where we continue to develop a conceptual understanding of the mainstream discourse and how it has evolved to limit and marginalise the underprivileged communities. Our knowledge based activism, including publications, consultative seminars and a sustained partnership between marginalised communities and our learning centres has helped us in democratising mainstream knowledge structures and policy development in favour of marginalized groups for their empowerment, social equity, inclusive growth and freedom.

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