

**Workshop Report\***

**‘Towards an Inclusive Classroom:  
Challenges and Possibilities’**

The Department of Education (CIE), University of Delhi under the aegis of MHRD-IASE organized a one-day workshop ‘Towards an Inclusive Classroom: Challenges and Possibilities’ on Tuesday, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2017. The workshop provided a common platform to in-service teachers and research scholars working in the area of inclusion. The 86<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment made education a fundamental right in 2002. Its legal mandate specifying modalities for implementation was enforced through the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009. This shifted the onus to educate learners from all backgrounds with diverse abilities legally onto the school. A 25% reservation for the children from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups was mandated in the private schools as well. This requires the schools to include of each child not only in terms of providing physical space but meeting her specific individual needs through curricular experiences through inclusive pedagogy.

The workshop envisioned a dialogical interaction on issues of policy to praxis with respect to inclusion. Educators/ experts engaged with policy related issues, developing resources with an inclusive perspective and working with children with different abilities participated. The presenters shared and discussed their experiences, pedagogical insights, materials and resources using several hands-on minds-on activities to make an inclusive classrooms. The workshop had 30 participants and was organized in sessions.

Setting the Stage Prof. Nalini Juneja (Head, Department of School & Non-Formal Education) NUEPA spoke on “The RTE: Challenges and Possibilities for An Inclusive Classroom”. She reviewed the background that led to the creation of the act and pointed out that earlier education was placed in the directive principles of state policy (it was a guideline, not a law or rule) and was not a fundamental right. It was later included as a fundamental right making it justiciable and a compulsion on state till elementary education. The 86<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment was adopted in 2002 with a major concern regarding the financial burden. The Centrally Sponsored Scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) included some of the recommendations of the amendment. The amendment yet was not a legal mandate. It was only in 2010 that the RTE Act came into being. The RTE is a framework legislation and each state must make its own rules from a set of model rules developed as a template. For example, for Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota, under broad directions, states can decide their way of implementation. The legal language of the law ‘state may endeavour’ to ‘state shall provide to all children of 6- 14 years in such manner in which state by law determine’ left a lot for the state to decide. She flagged the issue of non-inclusion of children of 0-6 years in the act. She gave a chapter wise introduction to the Act and explained the terminology. Specific parts of the act such as, quality of the teacher, norms for schools, social reform function, child protection function, statutory role

of civil society and removal of exams and oppression due to it, were read together and discussed.

The next session on Encouraging 'Reading' Amongst Learners in Inclusive Settings for Inclusion, had Prof. Anupam Ahuja talking about story reading as an inclusive process. This required accessibility in terms of comprehension and scope for imagining the story or what is being read. She spoke about the significance of story books for introducing reading and cutting across the age of the listeners everyone enjoyed them. She emphasised the NCERT resolve to make common reading material accessible to all children. NCERT wants that no child is blamed for not reading due to lack of good reading materials. For this Barkha series has been specially formulated for classes I and II. 'Barkha Series' and other books of the series were circulated amongst the participants. She added that the aim of the Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs in NCERT is to prepare 'textbooks for all' irrespective of any particular disability. The vision of the group developing inclusive materials was to create universally usable by all children with or without special abilities. She also said that for visually impaired students, audio of the books in different languages are also available to engage them in stories. Listening to a story however, did not ensure an experience of reading a book for these children. Workshops focussed on specific disability groups provided insights for the adaptations for the 'Barkha series'; a graded series with forty books over five themes. The adapted books had the same page numbers, illustrations and so on, to keep the book. The adapted books were available in both digital and print versions. She demonstrated the generic features of the adapted books using the

same story book in adapted versions of the story book 'ChupanChupai' (a colloquial name for the game Hide and Seek).

The session of Dr. Geet Oberoi was on "Engagement with the classrooms process: learning disabilities & classroom ramifications". She spoke about the management of learning disabilities & strategies for teachers to use in classrooms. Various kinds of specific learning disabilities including ADHD were discussed. She emphasized that the point was not to label them but to figure out their difficulty. The responsibility for supporting children with ADHD was with the special educators since regular teachers can not be sufficiently prepared for it through B.Ed. Program. Teachers however, should also have a sense of the needs and the ability to identify the child at risk so as to seek the help of psychologists. Many reasons for children's failure in the schools emerged from the responses of the participants. She emphasised the fact that how every child was unique, different and had his/her own learning style. She also stated that whatever she had achieved in her life was because she had ADHD as she could do multiple things at one time. In schools, we've to concentrate on only one thing and according to her that was the one reason for failure of these children in school as children with ADHD find it very boring and problematic to engage with only one thing (their learning style was also different!).

Using a video of a "Normal" and an "ADHD" child doing the same daily chores, she showed that child with ADHD seemed to be very active, restless and seemed less than the age whereas the child (considered as "normal") was looked depressed (these were the views of the participants on the video). This participants to challenge their

own ideas of 'normality' and reflect on expectations from themselves and from children. She analysed how school fails to accommodate diversity amongst learners leading to fault finding and labelling of children. She critically discussed the evaluation system and pointed out that measuring a few abilities in a limited time ignores other capacities children have. Discussing the presumed relation of the concept of 'IQ' with various disabilities, she referred to Albert Einstein. In the context of "Education for all" classroom management could be understood as intervention and accommodation. To explain accommodation and why it was not unfair for other students, she conducted a simple activity. She asked participants wearing glasses to take them off for a while & try to read the phrases which were on the wall (ppts). Some could read but many could not. She then said, "When you put them on, can you read more than everybody else can read- NO? Can you read over the wall -NO? With spectacles you have just gone to the level of what everybody else can do in the classroom, this is what accommodation is! From where we are, we are allowing them the level that everybody else is at!"

The next session was on "Engaging with modifications and strategies for visually impaired learners evolving inclusive classroom practices and processes " by Dr Preeti Khanna. She pointed out that inclusion meant creating effective classrooms where diversity could be addressed. She said blindness referred to a diverse group that includes low vision, total blindness, or glaucoma (Glaucoma is damage to the optic nerve that gets worse over time. She showed tactile materials that can be used as a resource for blind Students and said that these tactile materials are helpful for all not just blind students. They help in

understanding concepts of geography and mathematics. Such resources were made from locally available materials. Pointing out that lack of mobility leads a blind child to less experience, to less friends, to poor cognitive development and that leads to low socio-economic status and low mobility making a vicious cycle. To involve students in concepts the range of experiences to stimulate the mind must increase. They should be given all those experiences that other children get.

The next session by Dr. Seema Bali, Vice Principal, St. Mary's School was on "Living Life Queen-size: Decoding the Ability in Disability". She started by pointing out that inclusion means inclusion in all spheres and not just academics. It should get reflected in day to day activities. She shared the story of Appala and Hiranya; her students who were twin sisters both diagnosed with cerebral palsy and emphasised that there was ability in every disability and we must shift the focus towards ability rather than emphasizing on disability. She discussed challenges of an inclusive school beginning from identification to convincing the parents. She related insightful anecdotes from the lives of Hiranya and another student Rahul who was diagnosed as learning disabled. A group activity to find workable answers to some situations evoked a lot of animated discussion.

The last session Reflecting on Our Own Classrooms: Teachers' Commentaries had school teachers share their experiences and the inclusive strategies being used in their classrooms. Interesting examples were presented leading to a lot of empathetic comments. In conclusion although the focus of each session was different, yet their were common threads like diversity amongst learners, understanding/ acknowledging as well as encouraging the unique abilities of each learner and

the creative capacities of the school as well as of the teachers in meeting the special needs of each child. This can be done with an inclusive approach towards pedagogy, materials and classroom management.

*\*The Report is Contributed by Yukti Sharma (ygosain@yahoo.co.in)*