Transition to Inclusion in a Rural Special School: A Case Study

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Abstract

India presents a unique social context marked by diversities and disparities, which often form the context for exclusion. Education of children with disabilities within ordinary schools remains both desirable yet difficult to achieve. The paper documents the process of enabling a special school run by a non-governmental organisation in a semi-rural setting to make the transition to an inclusive school. Starting with visioning and planning, the process unfolded in a phased, incremental manner, involving inputs in curriculum, pedagogy and materials. This paper will share salient processes and strategies adopted, and the issues and insights that emerged including the current status.

Keywords: *disability, exclusion, inclusion, pedagogy, teacher training*

Introduction

The process described in this paper emerged from my involvement as a resource person, from 2002 onwards, to an NGO, RMKM (Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal) in Ajmer, Rajasthan, which ran two special schools for children with disability, from vulnerable sections of society. A review of the organisation's work led to a discussion on inclusion and triggered the need to shift away from being special schools. RMKM strongly felt it would be both feasible and desirable, and asked me to help in making the transition towards inclusion. At the instance of RMKM, this slowly developed into a process for enabling the transition of one of the special schools into an inclusive school. The process was initiated in 2005, with the first phase being implemented in 2006, and RMKM carried on the work independently after 2008.

The context

A special school run by the organization located in a village around 20 kilometers from Ajmer that had around 50 children with disabilities in 2007 (majority with intellectual or multiple disabilities) was identified for transition to an inclusive school. Children from poor families in nearby villages, as well as from urban middle class, with transport arranged by the school were enrolled. Different caste and parental backgrounds (half the parents being non-literate and others ranging from high school to graduates) had led the school to also deal with other forms of diversity and incorporate social inclusion practices.   Open space, spacious classrooms, and other required infrastructure was available in the school.

The idea slowly developed into a process for enabling the transition into "reverse" inclusion where *those without disabilities* could also be included in the same school. The outcome was a long-term plan for inclusion, or "Pahala Kadam", the first step towards inclusion of children with and without disabilities as well as diverse socio-economic groups, along with children from socially excluded groups.

Objectives

The objectives of the collaboration were to:

•   Enable the organisation to develop an understanding of inclusion.

•   Evolve and implement feasible classroom processes that enable inclusive education

•   Bring about the transition from a special to an inclusive school.

The process

Preparation for transition

To initiate the process of transition to inclusion, a situation analysis was carried out and data were gathered and analyzed so as to have a picture of disability in Ajmer region, on the jobs available for the disabled, the perception of society & schools on inclusion, and access to resources & inputs available to RMKM for designing future interventions. Analysis of this information informed the development of the

long-term plan of the organisation's shift to inclusion.

Envisioning the transition

Two key factors inform the development and implementation of any programme – an understanding of the ground realities or the situation as it exists, and the desired direction in which to move. While the first was addressed in the preliminary steps, the latter was generated through the visioning exercise. Setting targets merely in terms of numbers does not really help implementers arrive at exactly what they need to do, how they need to do it, and the spirit in which it must be done. A visioning workshop was designed to help all involved to *jointly* arrive at a common vision that they intend to work towards. At the same time, it was not merely a 'dreaming' exercise – instead, the focus was on understanding all that such a vision necessitates, and then *incorporating it into the planning and implementation process.*

The outcome of the visioning exercise was very meaningful and interesting and is presented below:

RMKM'S Vision of an inclusive school

If you go to the kind of school that we would like to create, here is what you might find:

1. It is a very busy place, with different activities taking place all around. Children are participating in these activities eagerly; and though all are engaged and busy, it is not necessary that all of them are doing the same tasks. While some are inside the classrooms, others are working outside. You see children exploring, experimenting, making presentations, doing written work, and doing a folk dance/song. After completing their tasks, children often evaluate their own and each other's work. No one sits idle, and no one's time is wasted.

2. In a little while you realize that children are not divided into classes, but are working in groups that keep changing now and then. Children of different levels are working together, sometimes with those of their own levels, at other times in mixed level groups.

3. The teacher is moving around among children, finding out and addressing their difficulties / problems. When necessary, he works with them, whether on a project or on cleaning up. When free, the teacher does evaluation of each child, plans out the next day. At times the teachers also discusses the plan ahead with children, in order to help them prepare for what is to come.

4. What is absent is fear… children are not afraid to ask questions; they come up to the teacher without hesitation. The teacher does not need to 'discipline' or scold his students. And when a parent or community member visits the school, children immediately relate to him. He too teaches in the place of teacher as needed.

5. In this welcoming atmosphere, a child in wheel chair, and a mentally retarded child present, look happy as they clap or ask questions and smile a great deal. Occasionally, you might even see the teacher teaching a child Braille, with other children being interested and wanting to learn too.

6. In this busy school there is naturally also a lot of sound! You might hear action songs and poems being sung, sounds of play material being used, of children making presentation. You might hear children calling out to each other "shabash!" (well done!), or "*mere saath khelo*" (play with me) to a classmate with disability or "mein bataunga" (I want to tell) to the teacher and the whole class.

7. Towards the end of day, instead of rushing off home, children do a recall exercise around activities they took part in during the day. Looking at them, a child who otherwise herds cattle, can be heard saying, "*Kal se mein bhi…*" (From tomorrow, I too…)

It was expected that these would serve as the foundations on which the work ahead would be built. The workshop also identified further issues that needed to be understood through later interactions / explorations.

Developing the Plan

This took place over a few months and incorporated all the inputs that had been provided till now. The implications of the initial survey undertaken and the outcomes of the Visioning Workshop were identified. A strategic direction was emerged wherein in the first stage, lasting 2-3 years, RMKM would initiate transition in its own schools, develop its staff's capabilities to help them emerge as resource persons, and help create models of inclusion that would be applicable in their context.

Capacity building

The next step was capacity building of organization & staff to empower RMKM for improved implementation, through appropriate and effective capacity building inputs especially on conceptual clarity and existing practices of centre and home-based care. This was a mentored process involving guided reading, discussions and mini-workshops and exposure visits.

To begin with, the focus of the workshop was more on learning and education in general, and then emphasis on the education of children with disabilities specifically.

Developing and detailing the pedagogy

Active learning was adopted as the core on which inclusive classrooms would be built. This is because typical classroom activities incorporate a great degree of flexibility – their levels can be varied according to learners, and even different learning objectives or modes

be doing / learning the same thing at the same time in one class.

Hence, a simplified tracking device was evolved – the Phase Card – which would enable every child, disabled or not, to learn at her or his own pace, manner (and even focus on curricular objectives that were more critical for her/him). The child's version of the Phase Card provided information on the learning objectives worked upon and completed, and the level achieved. The teacher's version of the same was supported by an indexed corpus of activities, materials and evaluation items that may be used. This would allow a multi-level class to function effectively – children holding the same phase cards would sit together, while those who could complete the objectives in a phase card faster could move on. At the same time the detailed planning, recording and activity/material identification that the teacher was required to do was also

Phase 1 (3 months)	Phase 2 (2 months)	Phase 3 (2 months)	Phase 4 (2 months)
Social environment: Ensure that children from different levels / abilities / localities / backgrounds get opportunities to work together. Teaching team identifies which children need help. During group work, helps them as needed or gets some children to do so. Delegating some responsibility to children (more social aspects, and related to school as a whole rather than classroom) Visible lack of bias in the class	**Social environment:** Clearer distribution of responsibility among children. Creating/ fostering cooperative and positive relationships among teachers.	**Social environment:** (main focal area) With families Ask community to get involved in the organisation of bal sabha, come over and see exhibition of children's wall papers / drawings, etc.	**Social environment:** Community involvement in contributing to children's learning grows, in all classes Community members come once a week to share their cultural heritage, or knowledge, or experience with children, at least in some classes

incorporated (e.g. use of manipulables or written work) to address differential learning needs or styles of a diverse group of learners. As RMKM teachers were already using IEPs (Individual Education Plans) for children with disabilities, and spending an overwhelming proportion of time keeping records and making these plans, this approach was not deemed feasible in a class with both disabled and non-disabled children. However, this experience had made the teachers open to the notion that all children do not need to

drastically reduced. It enabled multi-paced, differential learning– there was no restricting 'norm'

Finally, the modes and practices of classroom most helpful for this approach were identified, discussed and agreed upon. It was also decided that for the first year, the focus would be on Class 1.

Training of the staff

The staff needed training in different aspects of active learning, as well as in its specific

manifestation in such an inclusive classroom, including the use of devices indicated above. Thus, a recurrent in-service training programme was created. In the first workshop, the basics of pedagogy, material development, the development of curriculum and the Phase Cards were shared. Subsequently, in following workshops staff was trained for the challenges ahead for the next two months.

Implementation

School transition indicators and their implementation

It had been agreed that the transition would be incremental, in stages, rather than in one go. The intention was to make a practicable transition, such that it would be sustained.

The critical aspect here was to work only on a limited number of change objectives / indicators at any given time. These were converted into concrete steps that could easily be taken by teachers. As they attained the desired changes, the experience of success acted as a motivation, and also prepared them for the next, higher order set of changes. Thus their confidence, commitment and capability, all improved phase by phase.

The table below represents changes panned in the social environment over a period of 9 months.

Outcomes

Over the past 15 years, the school has indeed made a transition from a special to an inclusive school: the total number of children in the school is 175, and 65 children are those without disabilities. Starting from 2005, it enrolled non-disabled children and has since grown consistently in numbers.

The initial difficulties that parents of non-disabled children had in sending their children to an inclusive school have been bridged. The non-disabled children themselves had displayed fear of mingling with children with disability and this has now been overcome. Importantly, the learning levels of non-disabled children are high compared to neighbouring schools, while the learning levels of children with disability are recorded to be higher than they used to be in similar grades when the school was a special rather than inclusive one.

Some insights

As the project continues, several insights may be drawn that have implications for other schools as well as the government school system:

• A practical class process which takes into account curricular concerns as well as teacher's requirements while enabling diversity to be addressed, is needed.

• An indicator based approach concretises the process; conceptualisation (of a vision) in tangible terms is needed

• A phased, incremental approach to transition, which provides small, but rapid, results and acts as a motivation helps bring about sustained transition

• Capacity building is needed, but that too needs phased implementation

• Sustainability (of commitment to the idea) is critical. Even in the absence of continued funding, a consistent commitment ensures that the gains attained are not lost, and this attracts support.

• Finally, inclusive schools do make a difference! As the process showed, despite coming from non-literate backgrounds children from low-income groups attained good learning levels, while being in an inclusive settings made a difference to children with disability.

The project thus shows that the desirability of inclusion can be converted into reality, in settings involving children from rural and poor households. It provides a model that can be re-generated in other schools in different kinds of settings and indeed in the government school system itself.