Impact of Societal and Cultural Beliefs on Inclusive Special Education Practices in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

In 1995, India passed The Persons with Disabilities (equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation) Act, which guaranteed "free and appropriate education of children with disabilities up to the age of 18 years". This law was finally enforced in 2005, with the National Curriculum Framework, which made it mandatory for every school to have a special education department that overlooked the inclusive special education needs of their students. At a macro level, this paper highlights the social, historical and cultural factors that affect special education policies and practices in India. And at a micro level, it aims to comment on how these factors percolate down to the school system and shapes pedagogical practices and educational placement decisions for students with disabilities.

Keywords: *Culture, Disabilities, Inclusion, Special Education, Policy, Practice*

According to UNESCO (2006), inclusive education is seen as *"a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education."* The goal is that the whole education system will facilitate learning environments where teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenge and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education approach, learning environments are fostered where individual needs are met and every student has an opportunity to succeed.

Though inclusive education is not an option for every child with special needs, it certainly provides students with an opportunity to access a "least restrictive environment" (IDEA 2004) in helping them reach their academic and social goals, as competent members of society. Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show academic gains in a number of areas, including improved performance on standardized tests, mastery of IEP goals, grades, on-task behavior and motivation to learn (National Center for Education Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). Moreover, placement in inclusive classrooms does not interfere with the academic performance

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of typical peers, with respect to the amount of allocated time and engaged instructional time, the rate of interruption to planned activities and students' achievement on test scores and report card grades (York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, and Caughey, 1992). The types of instructional strategies found in inclusive classrooms, including peer tutoring, cooperative learning groups, and differentiated instruction, have been shown to be beneficial to all learners. For example, Slavin, Madden, & Leavy (1984) found that math scores for students with and without disabilities increased by nearly half a grade level as a result of working in cooperative learning groups.

According to Sanjeev (2007), India is one of the few countries where the education of children with special needs does not fall within the purview of the human resource development sector, but rather the social justice and empowerment sector, whose primary focus is rehabilitation, and not education. The issue of education of children with disabilities remains imperceptible, hidden from the public domain, a private problem for families and NGOs to deal with. According to Peters (2007), India has 70 million people with disabilities, and this came to light only after the 2001 census, which was the first time the education and employment status of people with disabilities was accounted for. Only 1-2% of these people are educated and they attend schools set up by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), since public schools do not accommodate them, and private schools are too expensive. Only 1% of people with disabilities are employed in India (Peters, 2007), and most others are dependent on their families to take care of them, as there is no government assistance for unemployment. In addition to these challenges, they face cultural barriers rooted in the Hindu philosophy that associates a stigma of shame and sin arising from having a disability. Thus, a lack of material access to services plus the cultural beliefs of the society, lead to the struggle involved for people with disabilities.

These policies and cultural beliefs percolate down to pedagogical placement decisions for students and parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities. While inclusive special education practices are currently restricted to serving students attending high-income private schools in urban centers, parents of students in low and middle income schools are forced to be the sole advocates for their children with disabilities. Most adults with disabilities continue to live with their parents, and this leads to caregivers taking care of both schooling needs and employment needs for their children with disabilities. Moreover, the larger cultural framework of stigma towards people with disabilities restricts access to inclusive community practices as well as inclusive schooling.

In the light of this evidence, the research questions for this paper are the following:
- What are the social, cultural and historical factors that affect inclusive special education policies and practices in India?
- What role does culture play in shaping teacher attitudes, and pedagogical inclusive practices in special education?
- How do parental views on special education affect access to services?

These factors will be discussed by highlighting current policies, trends and practices that affect students with disabilities both at the macro and micro level of analysis.

Social, Economic and Political Trends: Effect on Special Education

The social model of disability, within the context of poverty, negative attitudes towards disabilities, the caste system and the paucity of resources, plays a vital role in gaining access to special education services. While most developed countries like the United States face the problem of over-representation of certain minority groups in special education, mainly due to discriminatory practices in assessment (Harry & Klinger 2006), developing countries like India on the other hand, face a paradox where majority of the population are under-represented in schools (Peters 2004). Poverty seems to be an underlying cause and consequence of a disability, as it (a) is more common in poor families and communities, and (b) limits the access to employment and education, which in turn leads to even greater economic exclusion (Kalyanpur, 2008).

Pratham (2005) states that there are as many as 13.4 million children in India who have either never gone to school or dropped out. This includes up to 95% of children with disabilities, which accounts for 40% of the total population of people with disabilities who have never received an education, in either general or special schools (Jha 2004; Rao, Narayan & Mani, 2005). India has the "highest absolute number of out-of-school children" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2005, p.21), and it is one of the 35 countries that are most unlikely to meet education for all goals by 2015 (UNESCO, 2005).

Poverty seems to be an underlying cause and consequence of a disability, as it limits the access to employment and education, and in turn leads to economic exclusion (Kalyanpur 2008). For example, The Millennium Development Goals set by the World Bank in 2004, does not include people with disabilities as contributing towards the economic welfare of developing nations; the focus instead is on educating women and children to empower the nation's overall economic stability. Though the Education Commission in 1996 recommended that 6% of the nation's income be spent on education, public expenditure on education continues to be 3% (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2000a). According to Raina (1999) while 97% of the expenditure at the state level is directed towards teacher salaries, only 0.18% is directed towards libraries, classrooms, equipment etc. Education policy and funding is primarily a function of the state government, but programs such as Education for All (EFA) through the Asian Development Bank, as cited in Kalyanpur (2008), have been launched at the federal level in India to target out-of-school children. Despite these efforts, recent surveys have indicated that the numbers have not changed.

Apart from the restrictions due to economic access to resources, other major social hindrances are the caste system and gender inequality, which are still prevalent in India, and lend themselves

to the lack of educational access for students both with and without disabilities. Nambissan and Sedwal (2002) found a considerable discrepancy in attendance rates between boys from scheduled-caste groups (64.3%) compared with non-scheduled caste groups (74.95%). The Ministry of Human Resource Development took up reform efforts like the Non-Formal Education (NFE) scheme, which guaranteed education to all children between ages 6-10 years in a non-formal setting, so as it make it more accessible to them and reduce child labor and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), which offers vocational courses at the secondary and post-secondary levels. These efforts certainly accelerated a growth in literacy rates, and were more inclusive in nature, bridging the inequality rates between genders and castes. But in terms of special education, the Planning Commission (1997) had stated that by 2002, all children requiring special education services will be enrolled in special schools, special classes or inclusive settings where applicable, but these goals have not yet been realized (Singhal, 2006).

Cultural Beliefs and Stigma Towards People with Disabilities
The cultural beliefs linked to people with disabilities are steeped in Hindu philosophy. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world and the primary religion in India. It is difficult to define it, as it does not arise from a single source, its scriptures do not impose a creed, nor is it an organized religion (Sharma, 2008). But rather, it is considered a philosophy and a way of life to realize the divine by one's own efforts. However, some generalizations can be drawn between people who follow the religion. Coping with a disability, is not limited to a parents' internal struggle, and a child's manifestation of characteristics linked to the disability, but it is closely tied to the cultural values, beliefs and coping strategies that a society uses to view and deal with it. In coming to terms with a disability, people look for sources outside of themselves, like the media, internet, culture and a religion (Langford 2002). They try to figure out a cause and answers to questions like why they were chosen to carry such a burden in life. According to Gupta (2011), Hinduism provides these answers through the law of "karma" which states that deeds done by a person in a lifetime, affect their current or later lives; in that a good deed leads to good karma, as opposed to a bad deed which leads to bad karma. The law of karma follows the principle of reincarnation, and thus a person's misfortune may be linked to bad deeds done in the present or past lives, and the soul carries it along as it transmigrates from one life to another, until it is justified. Gabel (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of cultural beliefs about disabilities among South-Asian Indian immigrants living in the US, and she found that many of them believed that intellectual disability is tied to bad karma; and that it can be resolved by performing good deeds. Kumar (2000) conducted a study in South Africa and found that 80% of Hindus believed in karma and rebirth.

Gupta (2011) suggests that the belief in karma reckons negative coping strategies in people with disabilities who tend to believe that they brought it on themselves and as a result, parents are blamed for causing these abnormalities in their children. This in turn leads to feelings of shame, stigma, and dishonor to the family, to an extent where families isolate themselves socially to hide

the child who brought them this dishonor (Gilbert, Gilbert & Sanghera, 2004). Another facet of the Hindu philosophy is endurance of suffering privately as a consequence for past misdeeds (Gilbert, Gilbert & Sanghera, 2004). Many families deny going through any stress and pain, and will often not join parent support groups and other organizations to help alleviate their condition or support coping strategies (Gupta, 2011). In terms of access to special education services, some families are not at all involved with their child's education or do not even feel the need to provide them with services, as they would rather not be seen socially. Bit other families take it upon themselves to gain control, and use adaptive coping strategies to deal with the bad karma (Miles 1995). Those families who do take it on themselves to seek education for their children, become extremely involved, and strongly advocate for their children, by often starting up their own NGOs to provide services to kids with similar needs, as a means of overcoming their karma. Thus societal pressures and cultural beliefs arising out of a particular society and linked to a cultural context, play a significant role in defining and framing educational outcomes, especially for kids with special needs.

History of Inclusive Special Education

'A 6-year old boy, Ram, who lives in Chennai in India, went with his parents for a school admission interview. The general education school refused to give him admission because he could not see fully. He went to a special school, and they also refused admission because he could see partly!' (Field notes by Rao, 2003 at a national seminar on Inclusive education).

Education of children with disabilities in India, as all over the world, has moved from segregation, special schools to integrated education (Rao, 2003). Historically, special education services were provided in segregated schools right from the 1800s, when the first schools for the deaf and blind were set up in Bombay and Amritsar respectively. But according to Saini (2000), education policy in India took shape only after it's independence from the British rule in 1947. Out of this, arose the Universal Education for All policy, which mandated free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 years. In an effort to serve a huge population, with limited resources, children with disabilities were not addressed.

In the 1960's the government introduced various schemes to train teachers to teach kids with special needs, and in the 1980s, the Welfare Ministry set up an institution to monitor and regulate the disability rehabilitation programs across the country. According to Kalyanpur (2008), later policy efforts in the 1980s and 1990's were specifically directed towards students with disabilities, and included "The National Policy of Education, 1986, three major pieces of legislation (the Rehabilitation Council of India Act of 1992, the Persons With Disabilities [Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation] Act of 1995, and the National Trust [for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities] Act of 1999), and a bill recently introduced in parliament to make primary education compulsory." (p. 56).

The 'Persons with Disabilities (equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation) Act' of 1995, laid the foundation for the philosophy of inclusive education. Later that year, the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) was set up, which addressed modifications and accommodations that would make curriculum more accessible to students with disabilities. This was the first time that the term "Individualized Education Plan" came into effect.

The number of special schools rose to around 3000 by the year 2000 (Department of Education, 2000). By the year 2005, the National Curriculum Framework, set out to introduce an inclusive education practice throughout the Indian education system. It took into consideration all aspects of inclusive education, including pre-service and in-service training of teachers, smaller classroom sizes, and differentiating instructional practices. Though there have been efforts towards inclusive education, it is still a new practice that has taken shape in the last decade and is restricted to urban centers. Even in the metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Bangalore, it has not yet made the transition from theory to practice in a majority of schools.

CURRENT EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

Government and Private Schools

The school system in India consists of private and government schools. The private schools typically follow an international, national or state-level standardized curriculum. The medium of instruction in these schools is usually English, Hindi, or the State language, which varies between states. According to Jha (2004) government schools cater to the vast majority of students in general education classrooms. These government-run schools are free and in the native language, but they run into a series of problems including "teacher shortages, inadequate resources, oversized classes, and a national curriculum that is heavily rote-memory based and theory-dominated" (p. 170). The Annual Status of Education Report, India (2012) states that 80% of Indian schools are government schools, but because of the poor quality of education, 27% of Indian children are privately educated. In urban centers, more than 50% of children (27 million) attend private schools.

Language in Schools

According to the Census of India (2001) [*The 2011 data has not yet been released by the Indian government*], India has 122 major languages and 1599 minor languages and dialects. The largest language family in terms of speakers is the Indo-Aryan language family, which accounts for 790 million speakers or 70% of the population. The second largest language family is the Dravidian language family, which accounts for 215 million speakers or 20% of the population (Census of India, 2001). Although the Indo-Aryan languages (e.g., Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu) are mostly spoken in the North India, the Dravidian languages (e.g., Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada) are mostly spoken in South India.

The official languages of the country are Hindi and English. The British colony legacy has led to English being the primary language for government, business, and education. Although Hindi is

taught as a primary language and language of instruction in northern India, it is slowly being displaced by English. In the southern states, the medium of instruction in schools is both the state language (e.g., Kannada) and English, with Hindi taking on a third-language status. Again, in the south, English immersion models in schools is displacing heritage languages. Moreover, English is considered the link language that helps with communication among people from different states and communities, who typically speak several local languages. It is also considered the language of power because it provides access to the global job market. Whereas most of the urban private schools in the country offer an English immersion program with no bilingual support, the government schools offer native language instruction.

Special Education in Schools
The field of special education, and inclusive special education in particular, has been a fairly recent development in India and has taken shape only over the last decade. It is important to note that special education services in India are still predominantly viewed as being outside the realm of the general education system, even though it is mandatory to have a special education department/learning lab (which are similar to resource rooms in the US) in every school. There is still a considerable amount of stigma attached to a disability, specifically because people with disabilities are not considered valuable to a developing economy. This attitude trickles down to the culture of education and pedagogy, and a lot of families hide the fact that their children are assessed by psychologists or get speech therapy services outside of school. Currently, inclusive special education practices are limited to high-income private schools in the large urban centers of the country. There are three tiers of private schools: low income, middle income, and high income. In low-income schools, which constitute roughly 50-60% of the school population in urban centers, there is no mention of special education, and parents and teachers still view it within a segregated context that does not find place in their schools. In the middle-income schools, which constitute roughly 30-40% of the school population in urban centers, special day classrooms for moderate/severe disabilities do exist, but although they are located within the school site, the children have no contact with their typically developing peers. In high-income schools, which constitute roughly 10-15% of the school population in urban centers, special education resource rooms that provide pull-out services for mild-moderate disabilities do exist, but there are no special day classes for either mild/moderate or moderate/severe disabilities.
Pedagogical Practices and Educational Outcomes that Inform Educational Placement Decisions in the Indian Context

According to Kalyanpur (2008), The Integrated Education for Disabled project was undertaken in 1987, but was later masked under the generic development programs such as the Education for All (EFA). It is called the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) program in India, and includes universal primary, elementary, vocational, non-formal, and adult education. It also includes education for disadvantaged children, children with disabilities and ethnic minorities (Rao et al, 2005). The Asian Development Bank (2002) noted that the categories of disabilities covered

were very broad and ranged from physical, sensory to cognitive disabilities and mental illnesses as well.

Misra (2000) noted that inclusive education was not an option given the demands of the intense academic curriculum that is not adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Private schooling is the other option, but it caters to a small percentage of students who can afford it, offering instruction in English, and is often seen as a gateway to the rest of the world and economic success on a global scale (Pinto & Sahu 2001).

Vakil et al (2002) noted that despite the passing of the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, most students with disabilities in India are serviced through private and non-government organizations. These organizations are responsible for generating 90% of the funds for children with disabilities in the country and run most of the segregated special schools, after-school tutoring services, speech, occupational, physical therapies, etc. Inclusive education practices are restricted to the private schools, and they battle similar issues related to the structured curriculum, large class sizes and a lack of professional development. Even though the government legislations mandate both state and local governments to identify kids who are "at risk" by conducting annual screenings, offering a free and appropriate education and promoting inclusive education practices where possible, there are no provisions for referral, screening or placement procedures (Jha, 2004).

Teacher Attitudes and Pedagogical Practices that Affect Students with Disabilities
Although special schools are the predominant option for students with special needs in India, the movement towards inclusive education has started in some parts of the country (Jangria, 1995; Alur & Natarajan, 2000). Teacher attitudes are an important variable to consider while evaluating the efficacy of inclusive education programs (Ringlaken & Price, 1981). Parasuram (2006) conducted a study in Mumbai, India to learn more about teacher attitudes towards students with disabilities in their classrooms. He was interested in whether background characteristic variables such as age, gender, income level, education level, and teaching experience affected teachers' attitudes towards including students with disabilities in their classrooms. He found that teachers' attitudes significantly varied with age and teaching experience. Younger teachers with fewer years of work experience had more positive attitudes towards inclusive education as opposed to older teachers with more work experience. Moreover, if teachers came from a higher socio-economic status, they had more positive attitudes towards students with disabilities when compared to teachers from lower socio-economic groups. Teachers' positive attitudes towards people with disabilities are also positively correlated with higher education levels (Yuker, 1988; Patterson, 1995; Parasuram, 2006).

According to Clarke (2003), both teachers' openness and resistance to educational reform are embedded in the cultural construction of teaching and learning. Her study explored teacher

attitudes in Karnataka, India, where the current study was conducted. The goal of Clarke's (2003) study was to introduce in-service teacher training programs that were focused on student-centric pedagogy in place of the traditional rote memorization system. She based the study on four cultural constructs that represented pedagogical practices in India (Clarke, 2001): (a) shared holistic worldview, which suggests that individuals are not autonomous but linked in an interdependent system of regulation; (b) instruction as duty, which suggests that a person's caste stipulates a set of duties, which must be followed as an obligation; (c) structural hierarchy, which suggests that the teacher is more knowledgeable to the student; and (d) knowledge as collectively accumulated, where an individual's decisions are constructed by choices of the community rather than individual experience. Her results showed that "openness to regulation, the conception of their task as duty and possibly the hierarchical social framework allows teachers to be receptive to reform programs outlined by central authorities" (Clarke, 2003, p. 37). But though teachers have started using instructional aids, activities and demonstrations during their instruction, they have not integrally transformed teaching and learning; for example the classes are still teacher-centric and the school-based exams are still focused on verbatim responses from the textbook. I could not find a similar study that introduced special education reform in terms of assessment and intervention practices, so it would be interesting to look at the impact of my study on teachers more than ten years after the Clarke (2003) study was conducted in Karnataka, India.

Parent Involvement at Home and School

Indian parents value academic achievement and family interdependence, and discourage autonomy (Dasgupta, 1989). More recently, Jambunathan & Counselman (2002) conducted a study that focused on the parenting attitudes of Asian Indian women both in India and the US. While the former tended to follow an authoritarian parenting style, the latter followed an authoritative parenting style. According to Baumrind (1967), authoritarian parents tend to be very strict and expect their children to obey them with no room for discussion. These children usually turn out to be dependent, unhappy and socially withdrawn. On the other hand, authoritative parents exercise control with a high level of expectation but also respect their children's decisions. These children usually turn out to be more independent, with a high level of self-esteem.

The family constellation plays an important role; for example a lot of children come from joint or extended families (grandparents, parents and children living together) as opposed to nuclear families, and support for a child is viewed as a universal concern (Goldbart & Mukherjee, 1999). Peshawaria et al (1995) found that grandparents were in a position to offer significant support to families. Within India's traditional family structure, there may be a greater likelihood of other family members participating in child-care and other domestic chores (Kashyap, 1989; Peshawaria et al, 1995). The primary care-giving role, be it in a traditional joint family or the modern nuclear family in India, is still taken on by the mothers with little everyday involvement from fathers (Kashyap, 1989).

Sreekanth (2011) conducted a study to measure parents' involvement in the education of their children. He reported that most of the parents in his sample were committed to attending parent-teacher meetings, supported their children with their homework and were proactive with the teachers to focus on the welfare of their children. But apart from expected roles, parents usually do not question the authority of the teachers and do not have an understanding of alternative education programs, teaching and learning styles beyond what the school expects of them. Moreover, most parents are determined to have their children succeed on school-based exams and believe that the primary goal of education is focused on academic content knowledge.

In India, the availability of teachers and therapists in the field of special education is limited, and this increases the demands on parents to participate in their child's education and therapy (Goldbart & Mukherjee, 1999). An advantage of a joint family system is that a more experienced caregiver might be able to recognize typical versus atypical developmental patterns early on, and the care for the child with a disability is a universal one. Thus, parents are very involved with their children on the home front. Unfortunately, there are limited opportunities for special education services for these children and the society as a whole view them as a liability as they do not contribute to a growing economy. This in turn affects parental decisions regarding schooling of their children with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper documents the ecological systems in place that restrict access to inclusive special education services in a developing economy. On one hand, the paper focuses on policy and cultural beliefs and on the other hand, it highlights current trends and practices in the field. At a macro level, this was done in an effort to impact a policy change in terms of disability awareness, creating inclusive practices in school and workplaces and giving people with disabilities an opportunity to reach their true potential within an Indian context. At the micro level, the hope is that this paper would lead to providing more evidence about pedagogical decisions and help in changing teacher attitudes to students with disabilities in their classrooms. Another important contribution is to highlight the struggle of parents and provide them with more research-based special education practices and resources within the community to support their children.

Conflict of Interests
The author declared no conflict of interests.

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