**Inclusive education**

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The term ‘inclusive education’ became more commonly used some twenty years ago, although it had been used earlier, from the mid-seventies concerning special education. We didn’t quite know at first if the noun should be ‘inclusivity’ or ‘inclusiveness’, but after a while settled for the latter. Then there were other related terms, indeed Education for All (EFA), as was a used UN term, and slogan, for reaching the ambitious goal of EFA worldwide by a certain year, I think it was first 2015, and now pushed to 2030, with many other UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG4 for education. Alas, some countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, and some African countries, are not likely to reach the goals unless major policy and implementation changes are made, and allocations of funds are made.
The term universal primary education (UPE) is well-established and it should have a word in front of it, notably ‘compulsory’. As we know, UPE will not be achieved unless education is made compulsory, and only then will the most underprivileged groups be included, thus making education ‘all-inclusive’.
Most out-of-school children live in conflict and post-conflict countries and areas, such as Afghanistan, which is particularly badly affected, also because of political and cultural issues, including religion. Almost everywhere, more girls than boys are affected. Worldwide, UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics estimated a few years ago that some 260 million school-age children and youth are out-of-school, about 60 million in primary school age, another 60 million in lower secondary age, and 140 million in upper-secondary age. As already mentioned, SDG4 says that universal enrolment should be achieved by 2030, and UN agencies advise member countries on how to reach the goals. But a goal only reaches as far as the politicians want in each country, and also as long as the countries’ economies allow it. The donor countries assist but could do much more towards reaching UPE and other key goals, and the recipient countries could also do more if they wanted to reach the goals. It boils down not only to political will but also to implementation capacity.
When countries’ politicians don’t prioritise reaching UPE, it also has to do with how important it is seen by the country, both from a state (government) perspective and a private sector perspective. If the working sector has plenty of applicants for jobs and needs high numbers of unskilled workers, including illiterate ones, they will not push for and support UPE, and the government on its side does not need to do it either. Also, the government may be worried about having many educated unemployed youths, who may challenge the politicians and the civil servants in their running of the country; further education and training will usually grow as much as seen required.
There would be shortcomings on the side of the education sector, too, especially the government’s leaders in the education sector. In Pakistan, private schools have mushroomed in recent decades, draining the government education system for money, competence and parents’ involvement in the government schools. Naturally, the government must regulate the whole education sector, not only government schools but also private schools. The new single curriculum is a step in that way if supported and implemented by all. Currently, the powerful private school sector seems to be against much of it, perhaps also being worried about losing business, yes, because private schools are often to a major extent run for profit. But also if private schools are many, including madrassah and other religious schools, there should be a government regulation regarding core curriculum, organisation and fee structure. In many countries, private schools are important in the implementation of education. In Pakistan, madrassah schools play an important role.
All the above said inclusive education in the end has to do with how the students are treated in each school and each classroom. Special education children must also be admitted whether they have physical or psychological challenges; separate special education schools should only be used when handicaps are major. In Finland, a country praised for its excellent education system, special education support is given to many ordinary children, for shorter or longer periods, many times for a quarter or a third of the children in a class, and it has no or little stigma attached to it, partly because it is so common. It is a fact that many children have some learning difficulties, such as, for example, dyslexia, which affects some 5-10 percent of children, mainly boys.
Challenging home situations may affect children, for example, if parents divorce, which is common in Finland, or if there is domestic violence, alcoholism or other issues in the home. Such issues should not be swept under the carpet, and good teachers will know how to notice when something is wrong in a child, and how to handle it, also with advice from specialists. Any teacher training should include orientation about special education issues, but teachers don’t have to be specialists, and only in some cases, do specialists need to be called in.
Gender equality must be observed in education. That places demands on each school and teacher; it is not something abstract. For example, teachers must strive at treating girls and boys equally in all subjects, not assuming that boys are more gifted in science subjects and girls more in arts, for example. Besides, girls are often better than boys in many subjects and score higher in exams than boys. Hence, boys must sometimes be given extra attention, too, since the school in many ways, unintentionally, is rather made for girls than boys.
Another typical disparity has to do with socio-economic or class issues. The school is in many ways a ‘middle-class institution’, less suitable for children from lower classes. Teachers should be aware of this and allow students of different socio-economic, religious and other backgrounds to feel equally at home at school. In many countries, diversity and differences also have to do with ethnicity, language and other background variables. This may cause challenges to the teachers and students until it is realised that it is also enriching to the environment. In Pakistan, some schools have a good number of Afghan children, refugees and others, and that, too, should be seen as an asset.
In earlier articles, I have written about the content and curriculum of schools being too academic and theoretical, with little time for arts, practical subjects, and more. Although it is not so easy to change this for individual schools and teachers, they can do something to make the school less competitive and good only for the ‘clever students’. Government schools should especially underline that they are for all children, whether they are good at tests and exams, or not. Well, most of us are average, not fantastic, and that is good enough!
Good teachers emphasise the importance of imparting good values to their students, which often means encouraging values that children already have; a child usually knows what is right and fair, and the school must encourage the development of that, individually and in groups, and more. It is always important that a teacher emphasises that all students are equally valuable, and then, they will all thrive being at school, which again will ease their learning, social development, and interest in school work—in the spirit of inclusive education.