

Promoting community involvement: The key to inclusive education

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Abstract

UNESCO Regional Workshop on Inclusive Education ‘ Getting All Children into School and Helping them Learn, in a thematic group session (on Local Capacity Building and Community Development), participants were asked to write on a card what “community” means. All communities are as much places of learning as schools. Children often spend more time at home and with their communities than in school. Sometimes, however, children have to leave home and stay in residential boarding schools away from their communities due to poor access and segregated residential care planned in special schools for children with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive education, residential boarding schools, segregated residential care planned, the geographical terrain

Introduction

Do children learn only in school? Can inclusive education be practiced only in school? The answer to both questions is ‘No’! Children belong to families and communities. All communities are as much places of learning as schools. Children often spend more time at home and with their communities than in school. Sometimes, however, children have to leave home and stay in residential boarding schools away from their communities due to poor access and segregated residential care planned in special schools for children with disabilities.

The life style of parents and the community also has seen to influence the schooling of children. For example, the nomadic Bede community in Bangladesh travel most of the time and their children at-all, attend school regularly only for short periods of time. The geographical terrain of a region also influences the type of school children they attend. In Bhutan children often have no choice other than leaving their families to attend residential schools.

Are these segregated forms of learning appropriate for changing attitudes, and mainstreaming especially in societies where there is a social stigma because of disability, belonging to ethnic or linguistic minorities, poverty etc? Are we respecting the entitlement to a home, family and membership of the local community as basic right of the child?

Knowing the Community

Communities are as diverse as schools, and in order to promote their involvement we need to become aware that difference and diversity is normal and should be respected. We need to know the members of the community. Obviously any community includes the parents and guardians, their extended families, neighbors near the school and all who live

in the catchment area. A community may also include religious leaders (who are often considerably influential in changing attitudes), businessmen, shopkeepers, government workers and many others.

At the recent UNESCO Regional Workshop on Inclusive Education ‘ Getting All Children into School and Helping them Learn, in a thematic group session (on Local Capacity Building and Community Development), participants were asked to write on a card what “community” means. There was a wide range of responses that fell under the following four categories:

- People in a common geographical area
- People living together
- People with a shared social structure
- People with a common culture

Depending on where the school is situated (urban, rural, semi rural, urban slum settings) the community may be defined somewhat differently. We need to work with communities to make them aware of the implications of equal rights and opportunities. In an inclusive system of education there is a need to recognize their role, and value and respect their views and opinions. The community needs to believe that the right to education is a basic human right. Practice reveals that if we want to mobilize the resources needed to improve the quality of our schools, learning for ALL children and achieve sustained, lasting change, we need to involve the community and work together.

Community and Schools: Building Close Links

Schools and communities cannot be isolated from each other. In order to have sustainable impact and to enable effective policy-level advocacy there is a need to model inclusive

thinking and implementation both in schools and communities.

Planning for improved schools and developing effective school-community partnerships are the first steps towards inclusion. Schools and communities need to understand each other and reinforce each other's role towards comprehensive school improvement and a more inclusive, diversity-friendly society. The participants in a Thematic Session in the UNESCO Regional Workshop on Inclusive Education "Getting All Children into School and Helping them Learn" discussed this issue.

Question 1: What information do schools and learning centers need from communities to develop inclusive education?

Response

- The community's cultural norms
- Local educational and social needs
- The number of children with special needs
- Methods of income generation in the community
- The variety of groups living in the community
- Identification of children who are 'at risk' or who have dropped out
- Assistance that the community is willing to provide towards inclusive education
- Information on activities that are being undertaken towards inclusion in the community
- The expectations of those in the community
- Honest feedback

Question 2: What information do communities need from schools and learning centers to develop inclusive education?

Response

- Information about the progress of their children
- Strategies and development plans
- Parental education
- Information on the school environment
- Amount of funds needed
- The role of parents
- Guidance on the issues of inclusive education

It is often the linking of school and home environments that pose a challenge for learners and educational planners. How do we take account of all the learning that happens outside the formal or non-formal learning settings? How do we link the learning that takes place before the child enters the school or learning setting? Education has to be relevant to community life and be related to learners' real-life challenges. Acknowledging and respecting different views regarding the contents and methods of education is also important. Though teachers may be professionally trained in education at issues,

they may not be sufficiently aware of the knowledge and skills within communities and of how these resources could support schools in their work. Communities have been a valuable resource for many schools that have begun to develop inclusive environments.

Change in attitudes, prejudice and assumptions

Several studies have revealed that the negative attitudes of teachers and adults including parents and other family members are a major barrier to inclusive education as children do not have prejudices unless adults show them. Teachers' attitudes are influenced by their own background (education and training) class size, their perception of their work and the available support. The underlying values of inclusive education can be found in many cultures, philosophies and religions in countries in the Asian region. It has been found to be useful to let community members share these underlying values, beliefs and to question them to see if they are the ones they want to uphold. In many countries national level debates on inclusive education have been initiated to begin the process of consensus building. Communities have also initiated discussions to find out the local myths and plan change for IE by mobilizing opinion.

Communities can help in building awareness and create positive attitudes towards child rights by conducting sensitization programs with active participation of people with disabilities. The community can be involved in monitoring the media for negative portrayal of people with disabilities. The involvement of various associations working for drama and cultural events done on a regular basis has proved to be useful in monitoring how characters and stories project disability and preparing pro-active perceptions of the community including those of parents.

Involving the Community

Communities may not be aware of the difficulties schools face, and to what extent certain children have education related problems that could be solved through increased support from families and communities. This requires openness and information sharing from both sides and the acceptance of joint responsibilities.

An inclusive approach to education recognizes that the community has a real contribution to make and that they have a right to be involved in the decision making process. A great challenge is to seek the involvement of the families of the most marginalized students who often face marginalisation themselves. It thus becomes necessary to give them a sense of confidence and self worth. The schools and centers of learning need to ensure that the information provided to them is in a language they understand. Practice indicates that adult education initiatives facilitate them to get involved in the schools and their children's education.

In a thematic session, participants at the UNESCO Regional Inclusive Education Seminar discussed three issues and shared the following responses

Community based Education Management Information Systems (C- EMIS)

How do we motivate the community and other stakeholders to work together towards addressing causes of exclusion at different levels? How do we tackle the difficulties experienced with the national EMIS data, which fail to sufficiently reflect local-level variations? Can education data be collected using the community? The C- EMIS is proving to be effective tool to address these issues. It has been piloted in South and Central Asia (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) in partnership with national government with support from Save the Children and UNICEF. The C-EMIS system is designed to complement the national EMIS and facilitates decentralized responsibility for seeking out marginalized children (both in and out of the school system) and focuses on building capacity at the community level. It is based on the premise that there is a need to collect information and use it at the same level because quality data facilitates a shared understanding of difference.

Literacy mapping and Community participation

In the Philippines, literacy mapping exercises were developed to answer the question, “who are the illiterates and where are they located? It has been instrumental in facilitating community participation and ownership in education and aims to provide basic information on the literacy situation in a particular geographic area. It is a simple way to identify illiterate children since by participating in the collection of data the community learns through the process, feels involved and are empowered. It involves carrying out surveys, interviews and analysis. The information gained from the mapping is used for locating areas with high literacy rates, formulating literacy goals and conducting literacy advocacy activities. Literacy mapping reaches the most disadvantaged and has promoted school community relationships, established accountability, and served as an advocacy tool. It has been found to increase enrolment and help in student tracking and eventually reduces illiteracy.

Role of Families and Communities

Experience indicates that families and communities have played an important role in many different ways to support inclusive education.

Cultural Differences and Local Traditions

Inclusive schools embrace diversity and cherish differences. For children who may speak another language, or are from a

different culture, we need to place special emphasis on working with parents and community members. There are examples of their contribution towards modifying class lessons using local stories, oral history, legends, songs, poems and other folklore and materials to represent the diverse culture and language of the community. This help ensures that the community finds the materials authentic and useful, and feel encouraged to send their children to school. Inclusive practice shows that appropriate language training curriculum have been developed by working with bilingual teachers, or others who speak the child’s language (family and community members).

Promote girls’ access to education

In many countries in Asia, if a choice has to be made between sending a boy or a girl to school, the boy usually gets the preferential treatment. Girls are more likely to be asked to care for their families and work. Communities can play a useful role in promoting the education of girls. They have been involved in monitoring attendance and collecting information on girls who are not in school. Working with schools and families, they have worked on developing flexible school timetable (for girls who have a lot of other responsibilities) and also assisting schools in relating what is being taught in the classroom to the daily lives of girls. In some contexts they have identified and supported local solutions, such as organizing alternative schooling and home-based schooling where girls cannot attend formal schools.

Community (especially religious) leaders have been instrumental in encouraging girls to attend school and advocate with parents to protect and provide for all of their children equally. Practice shows that they along with other community members have talked to parents to see if household tasks could be rearranged so that girls can attend school regularly. They have worked with local organizations to organize community activities, such as child-care programmes, that will give the girls the time they need to attend school. Community Education Committees and Parent Teacher associations in some countries have produced media material on importance of girl’s education for household distribution. Community members have also been instrumental in encouraging the establishment of incentive programmes for girls such as small scholarships, subsidies, food/school feeding programmes, school supplies and uniforms.

Registration of Births

Children whose births have not been registered may not be able to go to school, or only be allowed a limited number of years of schooling. This may affect particularly girls. Communities have been found to work with local government agencies to conduct annual “birth registration drives, contact

community health centers and hospitals and develop strategies to encourage new parents to register their children at birth (especially girls).

Discrimination and stigmatization due to HIV/AIDS

Children affected by HIV/AIDS are less likely to attend school and are also often excluded due to fear. They may also need care of a family member. Community members can raise awareness and conduct sensitization programmes on HIV/AIDS while working closely with local AIDS organizations in the school. They can discuss with parents of other children, the needs, concerns, and ways of accommodating children who are HIV affected and reinforce that all children have rights including those affected by HIV/AIDS. Collective action can help in developing and enforcing school health policies that are positive towards HIV affected children and protect them from discrimination.

Fear of violence

Children may not want to come to school and parents may not send them if they are afraid of becoming a victim of violence. Collective thought and working with children and community members has helped in delineating necessary actions to be taken to understand the school situation and map areas where violence occurs on school grounds, as well as in returning to or coming from home. The establishment of "Child watch" activities has been carried out where responsible teachers, parents or other community members watch over areas of potential or high violence within and outside of school.

Controlling Illness and Hunger

There are no two opinions about the fact that children who are hungry or sick do not learn well. In order to help such children communities can work to establish school feeding programmes that provide regular, nutritious meal or snacks. Funds can be collected for providing nutritious meals to children in school. They can work with local health service providers to establish regular health, dental and nutrition screening and treatment programmes.

Parents' role in promoting IE

Teachers have years of experience and learning on the job but parents know their child best. All teachers have the responsibility to communicate regularly with parents or guardians about their child's progress in learning and achievement. Parents can help teachers by giving information about the child and suggesting what can be done. In many countries parents' organizations have been formed with more structured links with professionals. Experience indicates that they can be trained in the development and evaluation of early childhood programs for their own children and be encouraged to prepare and manage the use of low-cost teaching-learning

materials, including locally made toys and written materials in the form of traditional stories, legends, songs and poetry. Teachers can prepare their pupils to interact with the community as part of the curriculum, and through special activities and events and invite parents and members of the community to be involved in the classroom.

Conclusion

Children belong to families and communities. Communities are as much places of learning as schools. An inclusive approach to education recognizes that the community has a real contribution to make to children's learning and they have the right to be involved in the decision making process. Schools and communities need to understand each other and reinforce each other's role. Communities may not be aware of the difficulties schools face and to what extent certain children have education related problems that could be solved through increased support from families and communities. A great challenge is to get the families of the most marginalized students involved. It becomes necessary to give them the confidence and self worth.

Experience in the Asian region indicates that communities can help in building awareness and creating positive attitudes towards child rights by conducting sensitization programmes with active participation of people with disabilities. Inclusive practice shows that communities have played a crucial role in handling cultural differences, promoting girls education, ensuring birth registration and handling discrimination and stigmatization. They have been effective in handling fear of violence and controlling illness and hunger among children.

The underlying values of inclusive education can be found in many cultures, philosophies and religions in countries in the Asian region. It has been found to be useful to let community members share these underlying values, beliefs and to question them to see if they are the ones they want to uphold. In many countries national level debates on inclusive education have been initiated to begin the process of consensus building. Communities have also initiated discussions to find out the local myths and plan change for IE by mobilizing opinion. Promoting community involvement is the key to inclusive education.

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