

India: Disability and Inclusive Education

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I am really interested in inclusive education and disability. When the issue is disability, inclusive education means kids with disabilities are educated in the same classes as all the other kids. This, as you likely know, is a big change from special education. The big difference is that special education believes that some students with disabilities need to be segregated from their typical peers. They must go to special classes or special schools. There is no segregation in inclusion.

Special education was a boon to kids with disabilities when it began to take off around the middle of the last century. Before that, kids with disabilities mostly were not in school. The growth of special education meant that they could get an education, even though they had to go to segregated settings. At that time, special education was a really big change – and a positive one.

But change does not stop. Progress continues to be made. New and better ways to do things are found. That does not mean that the older ways were bad. It just means that new ideas and new ways to do things have been found, and that they do a better job than the older ideas and methods.

That is what is happening in education for learners with disabilities. We have learned that inclusion in regular classrooms of community schools is better education than is exclusion. Teachers, who used to practice special education methods, but now have moved to inclusion, have found it to work. The needs the students have do not disappear when students with diverse abilities are included. Inclusive education requires all the supports that special education does, but the support is delivered in the regular classroom, not in a special setting. When they are included, almost every kid is happier. They are accepted. They learn. In fact, research is now saying that inclusive education is better for all the kids. Those with disabilities learn from their typical peers. Their typical peers benefit from having more diversity in their classroom. They learn lessons about life that are not taught in textbooks, and they have a more complete understanding of what community means. The United Nations recognized this when it declared its policy of Education For All, and said that education in the regular classroom is the right of all learners. Inclusive education is more socially just for all and leads to stronger education for all.

That doesn't mean that everyone agrees with inclusive education. Not everyone agrees with change. Change upsets some people – especially when that change challenges what they always have believed. Inclusive education is a revolution in how we think about disability and learning. Revolutions tend to create a lot of heat and friction. It takes time for things to settle down and for change to be accepted.

On this blog I am going to be talking about inclusive education and all the heat and friction that accompanies it. I plan to explore the benefits, the arguments, the methods, the research, and the politics of change. I hope that conversations begin with people with different views. It is only by discussing our differences that change can be resolved.

My next blog will talk about something that is happening in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. That “something” is happening in the huge slum of Dharavi, with its

700,000 people. Dharavi is where Slumdog Millionaire was filmed. For those of you who have seen Slumdog Millionaire or have heard of it, Dharavi is where the kids in the film live. The most exciting program in education and disability I have ever seen is happening in Dharavi.

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