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Inclusive Education: A System Reculturation

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PREFACE

While progress is being made towards the Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as demonstrated by the drop in numbers of out-of-school children and increasing enrolment rates, there is now a stronger focus on those learners who are still out of school or are hard to reach. More attention is also being paid to the many children and young people who attend school but who are excluded from learning, who may not complete the full cycle of primary education or who do not receive an education of good quality.

Children with disabilities are still combating blatant educational exclusion – they account for one third of all out-of-school children. Working children, those belonging to indigenous groups, rural populations and linguistic minorities, nomadic children and those affected by HIV/AIDS are among other vulnerable groups. In all cases, the issue of gender plays a significant role.

There are overflowing examples of situations where children are deprived of their basic human rights, especially the right to education.

It is of crucial importance that all children and young people have access to education. Education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society. However, it is equally important that they are able to take full part in school life and achieve desired outcomes from their education experiences. While subject-based academic performance is often used as an indicator of learning outcomes, 'learning achievement' needs to be conceived more broadly as the acquisition of the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills essential to meet the challenges of contemporary societies. Adults need to be provided with learning opportunities as well since the ultimate goal of inclusion in education is concerned with an individual's effective participation in society and of reaching his/ her full potential. In this connection, inclusive education is most appropriate practice to provide education for all without any discrimination. Inclusive education is essential to achieve social equity and is a constituent element of lifelong learning.

Substantial progress has been made in achieving the Education for All goals as evidenced by the increase in access and enrolment rates in many countries and regions. Nevertheless, it is evident that new strategies and methods must be adopted to reach out to the 75 million children who are still out of school, the 774 million adults lacking basic literacy skills and the countless others who are in school but not necessarily receiving quality education.

Inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated into the mainstream education system, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform the system so it will respond to the diversity of learners.

How can we take steps towards ensuring that these children, who have a right to education, are not left behind?

The answer to this question is by applying a rights-based approach to education and by re-culturing the system. It means fundamentally altering an organization's culture, and its way of doing things for the promotion of inclusiveness and this requires attention to a range of interventions, viz. the curriculum, the nature of teaching and the quality of the learning environment. It means schools and learning settings should not only be academically effective but also friendly, safe, clean and healthy and gender responsive.

In the words of Stephen R. Covey "Inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a selected few. Strength lies in differences not in similarities."

Let us continue to strive together for a more inclusive, democratic, and peaceful future for all of us.

Dr. Pratima Pradhan

"Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures which exist in our societies; it is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone. Inclusion is about creating a better world for everyone."

-- Diane Richler, President, Inclusion International