

## Leading Inclusive Schools

### Harpreet Kaur

*Principal*

*Sri Guru Harkrishan Model School, Sector - 38D, Chandigarh (UT)*

*Affiliation: Research Scholar, Chitkara University, Punjab*

*principal@sghms38.com*

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#### **Abstract**

*Purpose - The greatest challenge for a School Leader is to provide equal opportunities to a wide variety of learners. Creating schools that are inclusive in thought, action and practice requires moving away from the traditional one size fits all approach and rigid hierarchy. It requires examining current beliefs and values in the light of contemporary ideas and practices that underline our commitment to universal access to quality education to all children. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of school principals towards inclusive education and how inclusion of children with disabilities has impacted their leadership practices. The paper also examines the organizational conditions that support inclusive practices, the challenges to inclusion and the leadership style that best supports inclusive schools.*

*Design/Methodology/Approach – Qualitative data was collected from the principals of eight schools using semi-structured questionnaire to understand their perception about inclusive education and how inclusion of children with disabilities in regular school has impacted their role and practices. Findings – The findings revealed a positive attitude of principals towards inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. Most principals reported lack of training as the greatest impediment to inclusion. Over-crowded classrooms, behaviour issues among children with disabilities, lack of acceptance by parents & teachers and pressure of academic results emerged as other challenges. Provision of resource room, trained teachers, special educators, barrier free access and infrastructure support were reported to be critical for successful inclusion. A collaborative, democratic and shared leadership style is suggested as most effective for creating inclusive schools. Practical implications –The study offers the policymakers and practitioners useful suggestions in terms of the challenges and opportunities for developing effective inclusive schools and designing programmes for inclusive leadership.*

***Key Words** - Principals, Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Children with disabilities, Leadership*

#### **Introduction**

In the 21st century, there has been a gradual shift in educational discourse regarding education of children with disabilities from 'segregated instruction' to 'inclusive education' which is also reflected in the national policies and programs of the government of India. Starting from Kothari commission (1964-66), The National Policy on Education, 1986, the Centrally sponsored scheme of Integrated education of the Disabled Children 1974, various initiatives of

the government laid emphasis on the education of children with disabilities in general schools. To support the inclusive education initiative important legislations were passed including the Rights of children to free and compulsory education (RTE) Act, 2009 and RTE amendment Act, 2012 that provides for free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years (till 18 years for Children with disabilities). Having ratified the Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities (UNCRPD 2006) of the United Nations General Assembly, India passed the historic Rights of Persons with Disability (RPWD) Act 2016. The passage of the RPWD (2016) pledges the rights-based approach and emphasized equity and social justice in education of children with disabilities. The Act provides for suitable accommodations in the teaching and learning process to enable children with disabilities access to educational services with dignity and self-esteem. The Government of India launched Samagra Shiksha (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018) to look after education of all children including children with special needs in a continuum from kindergarten to class XII. Finally, The New Education Policy 2020 has a special section devoted exclusively to the education of children with disabilities detailing various provisions and services. It reiterates the commitment of government of India towards providing equitable education to disabled children and 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development (Goal 4). The focus of most government programs has been on universalization of primary education and enrollment of out of school children into the formal education system. Various schemes like Mid-day meal, scholarships, free uniforms & books besides looking after nutritional requirements & providing incentives to economically impoverished households aimed at encouraging attendance and reducing drop-out from schools. However, there was no effort to gauge the learning outcomes of students nor was any attention paid to the expectations of educators from these children. Inclusive practices vary from region to region depending upon the school structures, values, norms, and social context. Hence, efforts towards including children with disabilities in mainstream schools have also exhibited huge variations from a separate special cell within the regular school, to resource rooms, to pull out sessions and in class support.

### **Review of literature**

The journey towards providing equitable and quality education for all children has been challenging. To begin with, the concept of 'inclusion' itself is understood differently by different people. Who is to be 'included' has been a matter of great debate? It may refer to the inclusion of children from economically backward areas, or those from socially or linguistically distinct groups or it may refer to children with disabilities. In short, it may refer to all those children who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion, neglect, under-performance or school drop-out (Ainscow, 2001; Kalyanpur, 2008; Singal, 2005). The efforts towards mainstreaming or 'integration' of children with special needs into regular school called for significant changes in the way our school systems are organized and how teaching – learning is transacted across classrooms. To avoid segregation the school system has to become more responsive to the diverse needs of children with respect to their abilities and special needs.

The move towards inclusion required better ways of responding to the wide variety of learning needs. Initial efforts focused at searching for teaching practices and methodologies that worked across settings and involved identifying and removing barriers to inclusion and developing environments in school that supported inclusion. Norwich (2002) also cautioned against mindless inclusion without putting in place systems and administrative support structures to make inclusion work. The effort has been more towards integration of 'children with disabilities' in mainstream schools, rather than integration of the 'system' of general education and special education (Voltz et al., 2001). Mere presence will not ensure acceptance, and social integration unless the 'system' responds by supporting children in classroom participation and is invested in their progress (Singal, 2008).

Despite extensive legislations and commitment to make the schools inclusive for all children, hardly any progress has been observed in improving the learning expectations from children, especially those with disabilities (James McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Inclusive education despite three decades of research has been a difficult concept to implement. Cultural beliefs and intrinsic institutional obstacles hamper the education of children with disabilities. Lot of researchers have identified large class sizes, poor infrastructure and financial limitations as the major challenges for successful implementation of inclusive practices and the barrier themes identified were lack of inclusive education policy, lack of differentiation in instruction, negative effect on achievement grades, lack of professional development of teachers, parental pressure, negative attitudes, and admission policy of the school (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Parasuram, 2006; Tiwari et al., 2015).

However, most attention and research has been focused on teacher education and effective teaching practices with very limited emphasis on school leadership. School principals and administrators could be the key participants and can play a momentous role in creating inclusive schools hence researchers in the last two decades began to investigate the ways principals could establish effective inclusive schools (D. DeMatthews et al., 2020). School principals are key participants in creating and transforming schools to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Their beliefs and attitudes towards the education of children with special needs in inclusive settings are key factors in implementing inclusive school programs (Singal, 2008). Developing the skills and capacities necessary for the kinds of reflective practice required to engage in cycles of enquiry about beliefs and practices is a challenge for many school leaders (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Research in inclusive leadership for diversity is in a nascent stage with few studies directly exploring the role of leadership in establishing inclusive education.

Hoppey & McLeskey (2013) identified four ways a principal can support an inclusive school. These include: nurturing & caring for his staff, buffering his staff from external pressures associated with high stakes accountability, providing high quality professional development and ensuring teachers had opportunities to assume leadership roles. D. E. DeMatthews et al. (2020) also found that few principals were prepared to lead inclusive schools and recommended

three areas that should be focused on for leading inclusive schools; firm belief, values and mindset, content knowledge & expertise and instructional leadership practices. Voltz et al. (2001) identified critical elements of inclusion as active, meaningful participation, sense of belonging and shared ownership among faculty. The elements that support critical elements include: Instructional strategies, classroom climate and educational collaboration. Rice (2006) examined communication among participants during the planning process for inclusion in her study and offered shared leadership as a framework for moving inclusion forward (Kinsella & Senior, 2008).

Principals are rarely in a position to provide leadership to various activities that are required for sustainable school change and improvement. Distributed leadership provides opportunity to teachers to take on leadership roles (J McLeskey & Waldron, 2006). While collaborative leadership builds capacity for teacher professional development, distributed leadership contributes to school improvement (Mythili, 2017). Effective inclusive schools have strong school culture and shared commitment to improving educational outcomes for all learners and principals play an important role in creating effective inclusive schools. The present study attempts to explore the perceptions of principals about inclusion and the impact of including children with disabilities in regular school. The study also examines the factors that support inclusion, the challenges faced by the principals and the leadership style that supports inclusive practices.

### **Theoretical / Conceptual Framework**

Creating effective inclusive schools that provide equal and equitable opportunities to a diverse group of learners requires a paradigm shift in the way our school systems are organized and respond to a variety of learners. The values, beliefs and practices that underline leadership practices need to be examined in the light of contemporary ideas of social justice and human rights perspective as mandated in government policies and legislation. Researchers in the last two decades have tried to investigate leadership styles and practices that support school improvement and contribute to developing sustainable inclusive schools. Pedagogical leadership is found to be four times more effective in contribution to student achievement than transformational leadership. While collaborative leadership builds capacity for academic improvement of teachers, distributive leadership has been found to contribute to school improvement. Since teacher professional development is the key factor that contributes to student learning and achievement (Mythili, 2017). A collaborative, democratic and shared leadership is suggested to be most suitable for establishing effective inclusive schools.

### **Research Question:**

1. How does inclusion of children with disabilities affect the role and practice of school leader?

## Methodology

### Participants

The study participants included eight principals from schools located in Chandigarh (UT) through purposive sampling. All selected schools were composite schools, co-educational and with English as medium of instruction. The consent was obtained from all the participants and ethical considerations of research were followed. The demographic details of study participants are depicted through Table 1.

<b>Table 1: Demographic details of School Principals</b>	<b>8</b>
No. of Schools	
Age	Nil 3
40 – 45 years	4
46 – 50 years	1
51 – 55 years	
Above 55 years	
Gender	Nil 8
Male Female	
Educational Qualification	4
Graduation/Post-graduation & Bachelor in Education	3
Graduation/Post-graduation & Masters in Education Any other	1
Teaching Experience	2
20 – 25 years	6
26 – 30 years	
Training in Special Education or Inclusive Education Yes	1
No	7