

## Enabling Equity in Classrooms in India

- by Farhan Shaikh

### The State of Inclusive Education in India

Equity as a construct propagates the core value of fairness and inclusion with a strong belief that all individuals deserve the available opportunities for development despite differences in background and personal abilities. Unlike the notion of 'equality' in education, where treatment of every child is expected to be the same before the learning process, 'equity' promotes redistribution of resources and teaching support for collective development within the classroom. Given the enormous diversity within a country like India, there have been remarkable initiatives like the Right to Education Act of 2009 and flagship schemes like *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and mid-day meal which emphasises on education for all but does not necessarily solve for equity.

Latest Children in India Report by the Ministry reveals alarming statistics on the dropout rates of girls and students belonging to other socially disadvantaged groups. There is a 30% reduction in enrolment of girls from grade 5 to grade 9. For public schools in rural and semi-urban areas, enrolment up to grade 8 remains high mainly due to the mid-day meal scheme and other government incentives for parents to send their children to school. With its high tribal population, Jharkhand has the highest dropout rate of close to 70% for school children. Dropout rates for minorities, SC and ST groups are also severe post primary schooling as shown in Table 1.

| Category | Initial (%) | Elementary (%) | Secondary (%) | Senior (%) |
|----------|-------------|----------------|---------------|------------|
| General  | 100         | 96             | 81            | 74         |
| SC       | 100         | 92             | 71            | 65         |
| ST       | 100         | 91             | 67            | 61         |
| OBC      | 100         | 94             | 75            | 73         |

*Table 1: Enrolment % across various social groups*

Rigid curriculum, inflexible pedagogy and standardised assessments further develop an educational system that pushes out children with learning disabilities and cognitive impairment. What results is an accessible yet exclusionary learning opportunity for millions of children distinguished by their social backgrounds, personal learning capacities and interest areas.

Owing to these persistent problems, the non-profit space has developed several high-quality solutions to foster equity. However, the solutions require greater collaboration and pruning

from practitioners for a deeper and scalable impact within India. The article aims to provide key actionable insights by identifying a set of critical levers that can enable inclusive child centred development within schools. Moreover, it encourages non-profits to leverage the proposed policy support from Draft National Education Policy 2019 and other untapped investments to anchor sustainable impact on ground.

### **Critical Levers for Nonprofit Interventions in Enabling Equitable Education**

Given the challenges and constraints of building equitable schools, non-profit interventions in the education space can enable social change through a set of critical levers. These levers have been carefully studied basis their potential to holistically impact institutional learning of children while keeping equity as the core principle:

- Adoption of Universal Design for Learning
- Teaching at the Right Level
- Accessible Community Learning Spaces as a part of School Infrastructure

#### **1. Adoption of Universal Design for Learning**

Considering the inter-state differences in the upbringing of children, teachers would need innovative training to familiarise the curriculum for children belonging to particular social groups and thereby enabling conditions for inclusive growth of the classroom. Universal Design for learning is a broad framework consisting of three key principles for meeting the diverse needs of students. These principles can be carefully integrated with the large-scale interventions of non-profit foundations through the following:

| <b>Principle</b>                | <b>Intervention for Students</b>   | <b>Intervention for Educators</b>   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Multiple ways of representation | Methods to contextualise the relevant global knowledge as per the perception of target children belonging to particular backgrounds and having special needs. E.g. Teaching of vital hygiene habits would need a contextualised pedagogical approach for children who belong to particular communities where norms are different | Develop specialised modules on inclusive education as a part of extensive teacher training. The following components can be covered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identifying children’s specific learning needs and socioeconomic barriers</li> <li>● Innovative pedagogical practices that adopt principles of multiple ways of engagement and representation</li> <li>● Ways to collaborate with peers, parents and</li> </ul> |
| Multiple ways of expression     | Provision of flexible child  |   |

|                             |   |   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
|                             | <p>centred assessments to assess their ways to express learning and develop a guiding report for teachers to adopt specific forms of evaluation methods.<br/>E.g. Children may express their understanding of hygiene habits through drawings, plays or other creative ways.</p>                        | <p>community members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guidance on finding additional support/resources when needed</li> </ul> |
| Multiple ways of engagement | <p>Through workshops and individual interactions, evaluate interests and motivation of the targeted children group under an established criteria.<br/>E.g. Lessons on hygiene habits can be taught through an effective combination of videos, activities and group work to engage diverse learners</p> |   |

A carefully designed holistic intervention by non-profits even for a simple topic like vital hygiene habits needs to establish the following key outcomes for sustainable change:

- Educators/teachers lead the examples of inclusive education based on the training guidance and foster mindset shift for parents and the larger school community
- Teachers consistently adopt child centred pedagogy in regular classroom lessons

## 2. Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)

The statistics from ASER 2019 present huge gaps in expected outcomes for reading levels and mathematics thereby making the Draft National Education Policy put greater emphasis on Foundational learning. However, delivery of equitable solutions to strengthen foundational learning would require classification of children by level of competency rather than grade. This lever can be harnessed for schools belonging to a number of untouched territories in India where resources are severely constrained:

The proposed model by Pratham Foundation called Teaching at the Right level is a leading example of a scalable solution. Given the rigorous testing of the model and it's inexpensive

approach to pedagogy, TaRL model needs to be taught to teachers placed in some of the most socially disadvantaged regions through careful capacity building modules delivered by non-profits and the state.

| Intervention Approach                             | Scalable Model of Social Change  |
|---|--|
| <b>Integration with DNEP</b>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The TaRL model can be integrated with DNEP to focus on Special Education Zones where a large number of socially disadvantaged groups would be present.</li> <li>● For large scale impact on gender inclusive education, the non-profits working on TaRL model can tap into the provision of discretionary funds for States, as stated in the DNEP, that scale effective interventions by CSOs to address localised and context specific barriers for girls</li> </ul> |
| <b>Long term State Partnerships</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● With long term state partnerships, TaRL model must be delivered through active involvement of all the primary stakeholders of each school to enable mindset shift towards implicit prejudice and inclusive growth of children facing various forms of learning impediments</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Holistic Criteria for Grouping of Children</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Although primarily focused upon current learning competency, TaRL models can overlook the factor of age when grouping children. Age influences a child's ability to understand as well as the rate of learning progress. Therefore, especially for socially disadvantaged groups, both learning and age must play a role in grouping mechanism and teachers must be trained carefully for taking the right approach</li> </ul>  |

### 3. Accessible Community Learning Spaces as a part of School Infrastructure

Community culture is essential within schools to propagate a shift in mindset towards the socially and economically disadvantaged children as well as gender-based discrimination. Given the constant encouragement to competition within the schools, teachers often fail to overcome their implicit prejudice and promote greater empathy between students.

In public schools, especially in rural regions, teachers are often scarce and disconnected from their students with lack of basic infrastructure to support a quality learning environment. Therefore, equitable solutions from non-profits and the state need to direct targeted funding

towards creation of inclusive learning spaces that can bridge differences and give greater opportunities to think, evolve and question.

| Intervention Approach                                   | Scalable Model of Social Change  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Community Libraries</b></p>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Community Library Project is a powerful example of fostering greater readership among students through accessibility to books, collaborative workshops, activities and non-formal learning</li> <li>● A number of community libraries across regions of Delhi, Rajasthan among others have helped build critical literacy among children belonging to low income families and minority groups</li> <li>● A greater collaboration among the non-profit ecosystem players can enable widespread scaling of nurturing libraries managed and owned by the school children themselves</li> <li>● State government can direct targeted funding to assist specific interventions around developing school owned community libraries within some of the most under-resourced regions</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Community Spaces for specific Disciplines</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Active community spaces for disciplines like sports, arts and scientific endeavours can be established within the public schools where group learning and collaborative opportunities can be provided in a structured format</li> <li>● A central goal of various community learning spaces can focus on providing multiple kinds of exposure to children and build greater empathy among them through opportunities of reflection and co-education.</li> </ul>   |

### Conclusion

Translation of the proposed levers to sustainable models of social change would require collaborative efforts from state and active donors like large scale foundations and corporations. In order to foster equitable education on ground, certain key focus areas must be established:

- Leverage strong growth in strategic philanthropic funding since the last 5 years by initiating a dialogue with active donors on the exigency of inclusive education especially in rural and remote regions with substantial underrepresented populations

- Despite education being one of the top funded areas of CSR donors, inclusive learning still lacks investment from this space and leading non-profit players in education space can drive potential partnerships
- By harnessing the targeted funding from the state as per the provisions mentioned in DNEP 2019, non-profits of both large and small scale can drive inclusive education across all aspects of school including curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and infrastructure

#### References:

UNICEF Inclusive Education [Guide](#):

JPAL [study](#) on Teaching at the Right Level Model,

ECCE-CSR Landscape in India and Potential for Impact [report](#)

India Philanthropy [Report](#) 2019

For India's poor children, community libraries are an escape, a refuge and much, much more, [article](#)

Community Library in Bhopal, [article](#)

[Draft](#) National Education Policy 2019

Dropout rate among school children in India, [article](#)

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Sattva has been working with various non-profits and social organisations as well as corporate clients to help them define their social impact goals. Our focus is to solve critical problems and find scalable solutions. We assist organisations in formulating their long-term social impact strategy by strategically aligning with business to provide meaningful solutions to social issues.

We'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this topic. Do write to us: [impact@sattva.co.in](mailto:impact@sattva.co.in)