
INCLUSION OF SIGN LANGUAGE IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: A NEED OF THE HOUR

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*The achievement of the disability movement has been to break the link
between our bodies and our social situation and to focus on the real cause
of disability, i.e. discrimination and prejudice.*

-Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities can sometimes be referred to as change makers since their presence transforms environments. The society is so strange because it occupies places that exclude people with disabilities while structuring it. The definition of inclusion is broad. The first step toward inclusivity is making every place accessible to people with disabilities. Building a ramp after someone enters in a wheelchair won't make the area accessible to those with mobility disabilities. However, making the area more accessible for those with disabilities involves building a ramp before someone who requires it enters. Likewise, people with hearing and speaking disabilities must get an inclusive environment before they enter the premises. Every human being has the basic human right to be heard and to communicate everything he needs to. Creating an accessible environment for those with speech or hearing impairments is a part of inclusivity. Not only should people with hearing or speech impairments learn sign languages, but so should anyone who wishes to communicate with them. People who know sign language as any other scripted language can communicate with people with hearing or speaking disabilities. The crucial aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is when and how this learning process should begin. The easiest and most effective way of learning sign language is through primary education. Sign language must be included in the school curriculum. So that every child will become efficient in communicating with people who have hearing or speaking impairments. The children will eventually grow up to be adults, and they won't need help from a translator to understand what their fellow humans are in need of. It's time to start from basics.

Language: the powerful tool of communication

Language is a medium of communication. There are numerous languages in the world. The

ultimate object of every language is sending and receiving messages. To make communication easier and more efficient, the people who communicate with each other must have proficiency in the same language. Most people at this age are multilingual. People speak and understand different languages, and it makes communication through different languages easier. Communication doesn't seem to be a trivial thing. It encompasses and implies a great deal. Words are an improved means for people to express their emotions. Therefore, adding colour into people's life is mostly dependent on effective communication. Familiarizing oneself with different languages, improving vocabulary, and gaining proficiency in a language are gaining more attention nowadays. Simply put, people aren't afraid of investing more time in improving linguistic knowledge. However, notice the sign language. People with hearing or speaking disabilities—most of them—live in a world of silence. Since nobody tries to learn sign language, not even the friends or relatives of those who have hearing or speech impairments. It makes their lives even harder. Because, even if they got an opportunity to learn and excel in the sign language, people surrounding them may not even have a basic knowledge of the sign language. It creates difficulty in proper communication. Eventually, it may force the persons with hearing or speaking disabilities to lead a life in the world of silence, limit the conversation among the individuals who know sign language, or accept the incorrect signs from others. Accepting this situation to continue will never end the prejudices against people with hearing or speaking disabilities. The people with hearing or speaking impairments in many societies, are exceedingly neglected and stigmatized¹. Consequent upon this development, a teeming population of this group of individuals resort to begging on the streets, city gates, road junctions, especially at traffic lights intersections, and many such locations that are thickly populated². Parents, relatives and neighbours who, themselves, may be poor, illiterate or semi-literate, usually do have little or nothing to support them, but take the cheaper option of sending these rather unfortunate ones to the streets³. It is possible to end this unfortunate circumstance by fostering an inclusive culture in society. Accepting and acknowledging the sign language is the foremost thing to do. Because limiting sign language only to those who have hearing or speaking disabilities may impart a sense of division.

Language diversity is also valued under the Indian Constitution. The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists the official languages of the nation for this particular reason. Twenty-two

¹ Akaninyene John Sampson, "Inclusive classroom and academic performance of deaf-and-dumb students in visual arts in the university of Uyo, Nigeria" 20 (1) LWATI (2023).

² Ibid.

³ Supra 1.

languages are listed in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution; fourteen of these languages were originally listed in the Constitution. 1967 marked the addition of Sindhi. Following that, in 1992, three more languages were added: Konkani, Manipuri, and Nepali. Then, in 2004, Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, and Santhali were added. More languages are currently being demanded to be included to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The evolution of languages is influenced by various socio-political aspects, which differ from region to region. Therefore, raising a voice for the inclusion of more languages in the schedule and the attempts made to expand the eighth schedule is an appreciable effort. But the fact that sign languages are not on the schedule even after decades of the enactment of the Constitution hits hard. Sign language should be included in the constitution, since a wide range of people in the community use it. Sign language is not just mere gestures; it's a language beautifully used by the needy. Inclusion of sign language in the constitution will be the greatest attempt to widen the scope of inclusive education for people with hearing or speaking impairments. However, it is striking that even after decades of the Constitution's enactment, sign languages are not included in the schedule. Sign language should be included in the constitution, since a wide range of people in the community use it. Sign language is not just mere gestures; it's a language beautifully used by the needy. Inclusion of sign language in the constitution will be the greatest attempt to widen the scope of inclusive education for people with hearing or speaking impairments.

Inclusive Education

Inclusion is a philosophy that seeks the acceptance of all learners

-Henderson & Lasley

Education is a right for everyone. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ascertains that "everyone has the right to education." Moreover, Article 21A of the Indian Constitution declares that "the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years." Hence, there is nothing to debate about whether everyone possesses an equal right to education or not. Every human being has the inherent right to education. The term "right to life" is most frequently used while discussing the right to education. However, the right to equality includes the right to education as well. Since it is everyone's equal right to receive a top-notch education. If we are adopting the words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to define equality, it can be termed "equals should be treated equally and unequally." This can be explained in an illustrative way: "Offering services to an old man

without forcing him into a queue won't violate the rights of a healthy man who is forced to go in a queue. Children with disabilities need to be given special consideration while talking about every child's access to a high-quality education. Does it mean the construction of special schools? Separating children who are suffering from any form of disability from other students won't uphold the principle of equality. This brings us to the necessity of inclusive education. The term "inclusive education" refers to affirmative action that improves the lives of children with disabilities, not just a word. The two concepts, 'integration' and 'inclusion', are used to refer to the process by which students with special needs move from a separate educational placement to study with non-disabled students⁴. The term integration is defined by Booth (2000) as the participation of students with special needs in the educational and social life in general primary and secondary schools⁵. This definition was supported by Zionts (2005) where he sees the integration as the 'bringing of children together as a whole' away from segregated settings to mainstream settings⁶. It is evident from these definitions that the concept of inclusivity is not entirely fulfilled by the term integration. To put it simply, integration is the process of guaranteeing that children with disabilities attend general education classes to some degree. The integration of students with disabilities in general schools does not necessarily mean shared classes or curricula or outcomes.⁷ It is based on the notion that deaf students need to feel that they are part of the social environment of mainstream schools.⁸ The demand for children with disabilities to live in inclusive environments cannot be met by offering integration as a temporary form of inclusion. The context is more significant for the phrase "inclusion" than "integration" alone. Hegarty (1981) defined the term inclusion as the: 'process of reform and restructuring of the school as a whole, with the aim of ensuring that all pupils can have access to the whole range of social and educational opportunities offered by the school.'⁹ Therefore, inclusion refers to a process of rebuilding or reforming the current educational framework. In general, the needs of students with disabilities are not given enough consideration during the construction of the educational system. This is the reason that "special reference" measures, such as specific curricula, special schools, or tutors, were implemented each and every time. In actuality, it's time to get rid of the "special culture" and establish an

⁴ Abdulaziz Alothman, *Inclusive Education for Deaf Students in Saudi Arabia: Perceptions of Schools Principals, Teachers and Parents (2014)* (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Lincoln).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Supra 4.

⁷ Supra 4.

⁸ Supra 4.

⁹ Supra 4.

inclusive one.

The Salamanca Declaration's¹⁰ contributions to pushing the whole world towards the idea of inclusivity are not a tiny thing. It enumerates several recommendations to advance inclusive education. Such as; Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning¹¹; Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs¹²; Education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs¹³; Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs¹⁴; Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving an education for all¹⁵.

An inclusive educational system is always necessary, not just for one specific set of people. However, society as a whole needs it. Because, Inclusive education promotes inclusive and tolerant societies, with benefits for students with and without disabilities, families of students with disabilities, and the larger community.¹⁶ Moreover, Excluding persons with disabilities, particularly children with disabilities, from education has high social and economic costs that endure for a lifetime; It is concerned with developing a sense of belonging, value and being valued as well as accepting differences¹⁷. It wouldn't be unreasonable to conclude that inclusive education would lead to a society in which all individuals are treated equally. For pupils in inclusive education programs, whether or not they have disabilities, to become compassionate and accepting of others rather than just a group of people who need to be sympathized with. Inclusion in education, is concerned with breaking down barriers to learning and increasing participation for all students, treating all learners on the basis of equality and non-

¹⁰ THE SALAMANCA STATEMENT AND FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION adopted by WORLD CONFERENCE ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION: ACCESS AND QUALITY

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Supra 10.

¹³ Supra 10.

¹⁴ Supra 10.

¹⁵ Supra 10.

¹⁶ Supra 1.

¹⁷ Supra 1.

discrimination¹⁸.

Inclusive Education and the Sign Language

“The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create.”

- Barak Obama

People with disabilities can benefit greatly from inclusive education in many ways. Inclusiveness means a complete improvement in the physical and mental inclusiveness of the needy. Disabilities vary, as is a well-known fact. The RPWD Act, 2016, contains a list of twenty-one different kinds of disabilities. Hearing or speaking impairments are also listed in it. Special consideration should be given to students with speech or hearing impairments in the inclusive education system. When a student with a speech or hearing disability is admitted to a regular classroom, the tutor has to closely monitor the student's ability to interpret words and gestures, as well as if the student can carry on a proper discussion with the teacher and other students. Instead of adding to a teacher's workload, this kind of monitoring will help the tutor become a better teacher. Because the education system and teachers can decide a person's future to some extent. Individuals who recall Helen Keller's most significant accomplishments also tend to remember her teacher and lifelong friend, Anne Sullivan Macy.

In order to enhance inclusive education for students who have speech or hearing impairments, teachers need to be extremely competent in sign language. Additionally, for the classroom to be a healthy place for students with speech or hearing impairments, other students need to be proficient in sign language. This can't be done in the span of a single day or night. Children must be trained from childhood. Every child must get an opportunity to become familiar with the sign languages in the same way they learn alphabets and numbers. Every primary text book must contain the signs for different words and objects, and it must continue until the learner acquires the basis of sign language.

The inclusion of sign language in the curriculum is never an optional thing. It is a mandatory step to make the education system inclusive for people with disabilities. Children coming from an inclusive education culture must be the adults who can create an inclusive societal culture.

¹⁸ Supra 1.

Conclusion

A life without being understood by fellow humans may never be a happy and prosperous one. Every human needs someone to understand. Every human needs someone to hear. It is never mandatory that the language or medium of speaking, listening, or understanding must be in the uniform form. It may vary depending on the people. Likewise, sign language must be treated as a separate language, and it needs to be included in the scheduled list of languages too. We taught our children different languages once they were capable of producing sounds. But sign language is always apart from such general learning circumstances. In all cultures children with disabilities are endangered species¹⁹. Children with disabilities who experience marginalization in the classroom frequently go on to experience marginalization in other areas of their lives. On the other hand, inclusiveness within the classroom can help such children engage confidently in societal activities once they are mature. Children with hearing or speaking disabilities must be inclusively engaged within the educational system. There must be an overall change in the whole educational system to make it more inclusive. Along with all the technical assistance, the curriculum must be improved. Changes must begin with the basics. As the famous proverb denotes, a stitch in time saves nine.

¹⁹ Supra 1.