



Exploring an Equitable and Inclusive Pedagogy : Ecological aspects influencing the implementation of Inclusive and Equitable education in mainstream educational institutions in Assam.

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(Received: 13-01-2022; Accepted:27-07-2022; Published: 07-08-2022)

Abstract

Literacy is not Education. In the present era, 'All for Learners , For All Learners' is the buzzword. The NEP, 2020 has added fuel to the mission , 'Education for All'. Economic developments together with the interplay between economic dynamism in the hour of digitization and demographic shifts towards urban areas suggest that the access to education will have to be expanded. Also Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is an ethos that recognises the value of diverse voices and centres inclusivity and students wellbeing as central facets of success. In the attempt to provide equitable and inclusive education, innovation should not be restricted to new technology or pedagogy but it should also necessitates a continual questioning of what role the institution can and should play in this regard.

The government places much of the responsibility for delivering an equitable and inclusive education with schools. Though this may seem to be an herculean task, but " just because schools can't do everything doesn't mean they cannot achieve something". (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012, p20.).

Keywords: NEP 2020, Equity, Inclusion, Diversity Assam

1. Introduction:

Literacy is not Education. In the present era, 'All for Learners , For All Learners' is the buzzword. The NEP, 2020 has added fuel to the mission , 'Education for All'. Economic developments together with the interplay between economic dynamism in the hour of digitization and demographic shifts towards urban areas suggest that the access to education will have to be expanded. Also Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is an ethos that recognises the value of diverse voices and centres inclusivity and students wellbeing as central facets of success. In the attempt to provide equitable and inclusive education, innovation should not be restricted to new technology or pedagogy but it should also necessitates a continual questioning of what role the institution can and should play in this regard.

The OECD (2012) established that "an equitable education system can redress the effect of broader social and economic inequalities

As education has or will become boundaryless, the students are bound to develop a bond with their cohort but not with a particular location. The institution are to act as facilitators where students get to know about different cultures and environments. There is a need of flexibility of physical learning spaces. The quality that is required to be developed among students is adaption, self-learning, creativity, and other soft skills.

Equal opportunities is an objective to be achieve in a sustainable society, as formulated by various sustainable development objectives.(Gracia, Toledo and Rodrigues,2020).

The right of all children to education is asserted in numerous international treaties and texts, and has been affirmed by both legally binding and non-binding instruments.(UNESCO, 2017).

Assam has witnessed a visible improvement in education especially with regard to education and also education infrastructure, budget allocation and students

enrolment in the recent years. The implementation of National Education Policy in lines of Equity and Inclusiveness requires an enquiry into the ecological aspects influencing the implementation and the also its preparedness.

2. Objectives

The study has a dual objectives in the light of NEP, 2020:

1. To study and explore an equitable and inclusive pedagogy.
2. To analyse the ecological aspects affecting the implementation of inclusive and equitable education in educational institutions in Assam

3. Research methodology

The target of the study was to understand which ecological aspects influenced the implementation of inclusive and equitable education in the mainstream educational institutions in Assam and exploring an equitable and inclusive pedagogy. Field investigators were used to collect information/data through questionnaire with open ended questions and semi-structured interviews. A phenomenological strategy was used due to the flexibility of the approach and as such can be used to ever widening areas of enquiry.

Two stage sampling was used in the survey. In the first stage, purposeful sampling was used and then the second stage consisted of snowballing sampling. The entire Brahmaputra valley was considered for the survey and the participants were officials, school principals and teachers.

The article uses a qualitative approach and phenomenological strategy to focus on the ecological aspects influencing the implementation of Inclusive and Equitable education in mainstream educational institutions in Assam together with the equitable and inclusive pedagogy. A process of framework analysis was used for the data analysis

4. NEP 2020 and expectation

The UNESCO vision for inclusion is imbibed in Guidelines for Inclusion, as “a process which is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers of education and ensures the presence, participation and achievement of all students all students and their diversities.”

Equity is at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with Target 4.5, specifically aiming to “eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to all levels of education

and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.”

Keeping this global vision in mind the NEP 2020 was developed as the third educational policy after 34 years after 1986, the first being announced in 1968. It seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. This goal is a enormous task as the present learning outcomes are stubbornly low”.

The definition of inclusiveness has been widened by broadening the categories of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) by including individuals and crucial intersectionalities such as migrant communities, transgender individuals, etc. One of the most crucial aspects of the NEP is the recognition of the crucial issues like, growing inequality and inequity plaguing the education system, high drop-out rates among vulnerable minorities, reasons behind lesser participation of girl children in rural areas, needs of children living in difficult geographical regions, etc.

Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out all learners (Bhat & Geelani, 2017)

There has always been the need of Multicultural competence, not only for the students but also for the teachers. It is necessary to make a person competent enough to understand and negotiate cultural diversity among the nations as well as within the nations. In the nation full of diversity, multicultural competence is inevitable to achieve Equity.

Pedagogy is crucial for the educators to achieve the objectives of Equity and Inclusion. Pedagogy for inclusive education continues to evolve in line with views on difference, inclusion and exclusion. Complex though it might seem at times, what remains a constant is a respect for the learning of all and a desire and a willingness to better cater to the needs of all children via the ways in which they learn and we teach them (Loreman, 2017)

Equity pedagogy is a process that helps educators to understand the learning styles of the students from diverse cultural upbringing, so that the educators can employ different instructional strategies to help students learn the concepts. These will require pedagogical knowledge, skills and dispositions of the educators to allow them to adapt alternative teaching methods or modify instructional

strategies in culturally diverse classrooms.

The curriculum should aim for social justice. This will usher in an adequate understanding of the demographics of the students, culture and race in popular culture and development of social action skills. It also emphasizes the clearing up of myths and stereotypes associated with gender, age and various races and ethnic groups by stressing basic human similarities (NIETo, 1996)

Various studies have shown that the Indian school system is enormous (1,522,346 schools, 8691922 teachers and 260 million students, approx.) and with the country's regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity, NEP 2020's focus for universalizing quality education will be a challenge. The governance and management will be tough.

5. Status of Assam : empirical investigation

NEP 2020 articulates that “the purpose of the education system is to develop good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values. It aims at producing engaged, productive and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive and plural society as envisaged by our constitution.”

Assam is a state with a treasure of cultural heritage in the form of Arts, Customs, Literature, Traditions, Artifacts, etc. NEP consist of major changes in the context of promotion of Indian language, Multilingual education, Art, Culture, etc. The education will be more prone to multilingual learning.

The student population in government-run schools in Assam are becoming increasingly diverse and the drop-out rates are high. At the same time, students who are excluded from schools or placed in segregated educational settings are also large in number. The exclusion of students in the main stream education system and non-equitable distribution has both social and economic cost.

In recent times there has been significant improvements , but still Indian, especially in Assam the education systems continue to grapple with challenges of inequity and exclusion. It has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to quality school education is still a distant dream for most rural population and the vulnerable and marginalised groups. It becomes more acute in higher education.

A survey conducted by NCERT highlighted that the pandemic aggravated the learning and deprived majority of children from attending online classes in absence of requisite equipment and infrastructure.

At the initial stages, school were largely only for those who could afford or attend it , or who were particularly well suited to them or both but this mindset is changed now. A school in Assam, to become inclusive in the true sense of the term and to avoid segregation, has to become responsive to children with a diverse range of abilities, culture, genders, religions, etc in the classrooms as has been revealed by the officials in all areas. The key to this is Pedagogy. Pedagogy can be defined as, it is how teachers teach and how learners/students learn, and is the fundamental ingredient in any successful inclusive approach. Without purposeful and effective pedagogy, there can be no basis for meaningful inclusion.

The states of Northeast India in general and Assam in particular have been a mosaic of multiple cultures and home to many language groups (Gogoi, 2018).

The society in the Northeast of India is Ethnically, linguistically, culturally, religiously, psychologically diverse (Verghese,2004). In this part of the country, including Assam, though the government are adopting different measures but have failed to eradicate the ghost of assimilation and acculturation over the natives. The NEP 2020 may be an answer to meet the demands of this cultural pluralism, diversification and non - inclusiveness.

The global framework of Multicultural Education proposes four interconnected concepts: multicultural competence, curriculum reform, equity pedagogy and teaching for social justice. (Wiles, J. & Brondi,J., 2019).

The need of the students and the teachers as well in Assam is to understand, tolerate and respect cultural diversity. This requires multicultural competence so that the individual (student) can distinguish other's cultural distinctiveness with his/her and can value the cross-sectional interactions.

The entire ecosystem of education can be subdivided as Macro, Meso and Micro.

The study would like to identify the impact of the system and also identify the barriers, if any.

The student is directly influenced by the family environment, cohort and the school. As in other parts of India, in Assam also it has been found that the economic and social status of the family can act as

barrier to the students attendance in school. The family becomes unsupportive as the parents are illiterate or with minimal education and as such cannot fathom the academic progress nor can they provide any guidance at home or they want their children to earn to feed the large size of the family. As such the children do not find a supportive family environment. All these factors lead to the non-inclusiveness in the education world. In the Goalpara district, Lakhimpur district, Majuli district, to name a few, the girls drop-out rate is high. The alcoholic influence, non-awareness or negative life style among parents/ family are some of the major factors.

We may have become a global community but the broadness of mind is still to reach the corners of our country. This holds true for Assam also. Equality in social status and Inclusiveness still lack cent percent

application. The cohort group of the students impose the barriers of discrimination, rejection or are labelled or stereotyped by their peers. This also calls for the intervention from school, handling capacity of the educators and encouragement from school to help a student from becoming socially isolated and also for their development.

It has been found that the NEP 2020 is set to bring a paradigm shift in the functioning of the education sector. The impact will be great in the rural areas and semi-urban areas. As has been revealed by the Principals/ Headmasters and the teaching fraternity that the major modification is required to align the school with new system. The primary requirement is training and capacitating of the mainstream educators for equitable and inclusive education and its management. There are exception as an interior school

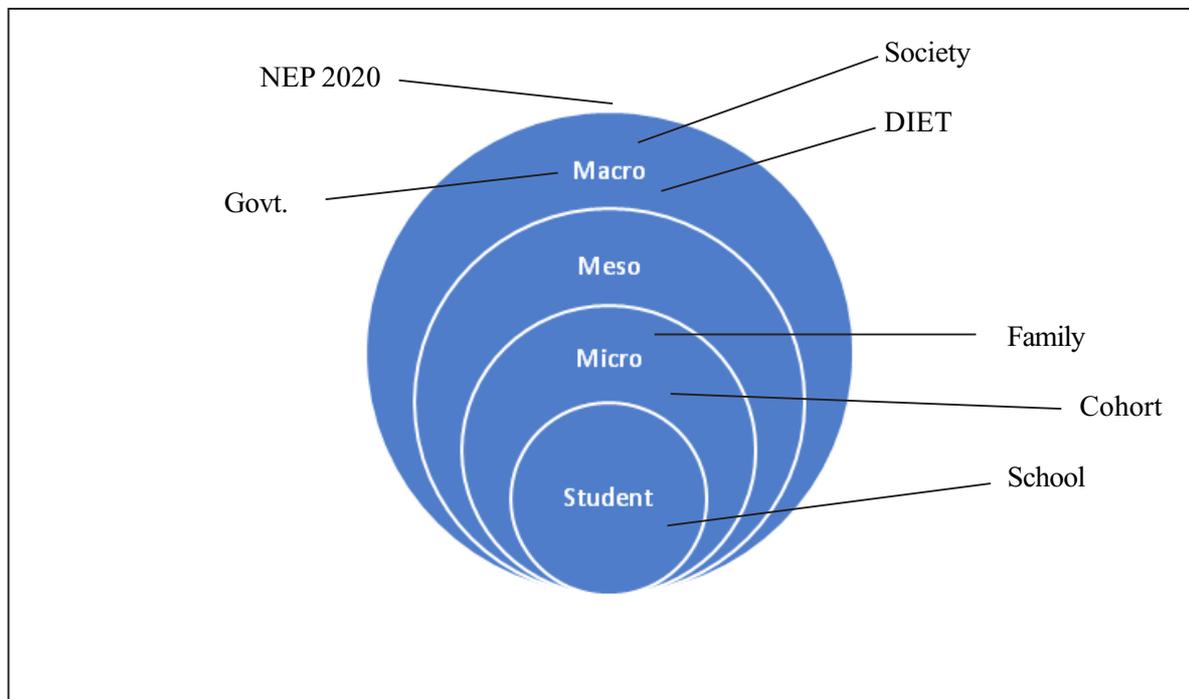


Fig 1: The Ecosystem of Education

in Majuli conducts class or imparts education through ICT or smart classroom. The distribution of educators is uneven. The student-teacher ratio is uneven in some school, this needs to be worked on to achieve success. Differentiation in teaching should be implemented, the resource constraints should be removed and there should be availability of assistive devices to support learners.

90% of the teachers said that there should be purposeful advocating of the inclusive education policy

by the public in Assam. There is also a need of sensitization of the people, especially of the rural areas for equitable education policy, so that learners of all kinds get an access to education and there is an eradication of social taboo. The DIET (District Institute of Education and Training) members in Assam should provide all support to schools and should play a key role. They should also help the educators or early identification of learners who experience any barriers to learning. The society and the DIET can play a

significant role in adjustment of the school to the national policies and maximise the utilization of the resources.

The NEP 2020 is ambitious and progressive and has the capacity to make the young population its biggest strength. More importantly, the institutional heads feel that the government should take care that there is efficient and judicious marshalling and management of all available resources (including infrastructure) is done. To improve the access and quality of education, specially in public school, the government should harness innovative solutions (inclusive of technological use). There is a need for systematic change and this requires full commitment of the governments with political will and urgency for implementation of the policy.

Education is a public good. The present scenario of this sector does not paint a rosy picture for Assam. There is the need that every stakeholder is invited to actualize the vision of the NEP to make Assam and India's education system strong, inclusive and equitable.

The teaching fraternity has opined that there is a need to create competence so that the individual may distinguish other's cultural distinctiveness with his and can value the cross-cultural interactions. The model of multicultural competence should be extensively used in higher education in Assam so that the students as well teachers may get competence to tolerate and respect cultural diversity. Curriculum should be prepared in such a way so that their competence may be increased.

The study has received a majority opinion that in Assam, the main challenge to the new model is the existing and restrictive framework of governance and institutional culture. Virtual tutoring and peer support will be vital in the new pedagogy and will also require the institutional measures to cope with digital certificates, digital payment systems and a completely digital student-administration framework. Together with it, the new age pedagogy also places the highest demand on the didactic competence of teachers.

Equity pedagogy is to ensure the attainment of the highest standards in academic excellence among all students. College and classroom climates must also be changed so that academic success is achieved by students from all cultural groups. This parameter can be used for bridge the cultural diversity in the state of Assam, by giving space to all in Curriculum design and curriculum execution.

Technology holds immense potential for innovating

educational practices and as such there is a need for educators that along with the subject they teach, there is the need to master the techno-pedagogical content knowledge (TPK). TPK is a staple skill for the 21st century educators and it is framework the encompasses two different types of knowledge, namely technological knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. (Yusof, 2019).

In addition to this, the study has found that the different stakeholders of the system advises teaching social justice. This is because it promotes development of awareness on the historical roots and an understanding of the evidence of individual and institutional prejudice and discriminations such as cultural racism, ethnic boundary formation, classism, ethnocentrism, acculturation and other forms of prejudice and discrimination. This has become all inevitable for a society like Assam, where the smaller communities are knowingly underrepresented or misrepresented in the curriculum of the Higher education. The course designs have been done with a top down approach having poor image of the minorities. Therefore, it is an important method to eradicate all the social injustice done to the common people and proper curriculum should be prepared based on social justice who may bring assimilation and equity in all section of society.

5. Suggestions

Inclusion program will become successful if applied through need assessment surveys are conducted. The CSR program of the business houses are required to interwind with the equity and inclusive agenda of the government through activities like-

- Creation of sustainable livelihood, water stewardship, sustainable agriculture climate smart practices, health care like strengthening mother-child health, nutritional content, etc on a macro level.
- While on a micro-level, i.e., educational institutional level, the need is for capacity building for equity attainment through vocational training, sanitation, school WASH (Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene), safe drinking water, etc.

The teaching fraternity can create equitable and inclusive teaching practices which help to create educational environments in which all individuals are welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate in the learning process.

Efficiency in the need of the hour for the common education system. As has been recommended by the

Kothari Commission (1964-1966) that all schools conducted by government and local authorities and recognized aided private schools must maintain an adequate level of efficiency so that there is no need for sending children to institutions outside the common education system. This would divert the people from expensive private schools to government schools. The mushrooming of private schools in Assam and lack of admission in government school is due to the lack of quality common education system. The target of inclusive education, envisaged by NEP 2020, cannot be achieved without mandating a Common Education System.

There is a need for attitudinal change in society for the effective implementation of any inclusive policy as NEP 2020 does not lay a framework addressing social and emotional learning.

There is the need to cater to the concept of “Emergency education”. This concept has emerged as an important one, if any situation like the current pandemic (COVID-19) arises in the future.

To ensure appropriate inclusion, teachers preparation, awareness and attitude towards disabilities, retention of special children, etc have to be made compulsory in all levels irrespective of elementary, secondary and higher education.

At present in Assam, a robust systems for managing large school systems in the public sector is

not properly developed and its governance represents the government’s greatest challenge. The reforms outlined by NEP 2020 will above without strong, efficient governance of public school system. For this data collection, monitoring and accountability systems in Assam have to be strong and adequate.

6. Conclusion

The NEP 2020 envisages to adopt flexibility as per the needs and demands of the students so that “Education for All” can be realized. This calls for the development of a scientific temper of the society so that it can lead to an inclusive and equitable society.

The policy will facilitate the multi-talented students of every age to pursue their aims and objectives. The NEP 2020 is a complete renovation of the earlier education policy as it provides flexibility and scope for improvements in Primary, Secondary, Higher and Vocational Education.

The success of NEP, especially of Inclusiveness and Equity will be determined by the operational standard of the policy. The government places much of the responsibility for delivering an equitable and inclusive education with schools/educational institutions. Though this may seem to be an herculean task, but “ just because schools can’t do everything doesn’t mean they cannot achieve something”. (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012, p20.)

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