

Social Inclusion: A Systemic Approach to Child's Well-being

Ms. Manju Rajput, Raghbir Singh Junior Modern School, India
Ms. Ruchi Thakkar, Raghbir Singh Junior Modern School, India

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Abstract

This exploratory micro-study attempts to examine processes and outcomes aimed at social inclusion of marginalised children admitted in a private school under the EWS/DG category of the RTE Act 2009. The implications of how this provision can be meaningful in practice are explored. The present paper explores the challenges faced in the implementation of the RTE Act 2009 at the school level. The primary concerns being fees compensation by the State Government, building new admission protocols, teacher in-service training, sensitizing the Non EWS parents and children towards the evolving socio-cultural dynamics of the school and ensuring inclusion in the wider school ecology. A micro-study of one of the admitted children is presented. The interpretative framework provided by Ecological Systems Theory is drawn upon to deepen understanding of the child in the context of primary schooling. The micro system, meso system, exo system and macro system; which refer to various layers of interactions in which the child grows up and survives are examined. This theoretical analysis deepens understanding about children enrolled in primary schooling, who operate in a position of disadvantage. The school based interventions in curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management are discussed. The paper concludes by presenting the impact of these interventions at increasing learning outcomes and integration of the child in school. The case study reveals the promise offered by the aforesaid policy provision on school education for social inclusion of the marginalized children of the stratified, hierarchical Indian society; with the wider aim of building an inclusive society.

Keywords: Education, Inclusion, Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Disadvantaged Groups (DG), Systems and Well-being

Introduction

A brief history of the Education System in India will help to understand how past efforts shaped the present education system and the fundamental role that education plays in the transformation of society. RTE Act 2009 serves as a building block to ensure that every child gets quality elementary education and the state, with the help of families and communities, fulfills this obligation. It mandates that the school's environment is transformed into inclusive and equitable learning spaces.

This paper aims to outline a strategy for making significant contribution to 'Education for All' and also to serve as a guide to teachers in contributing to the child's well-being. Our school follows a conceptual framework based on the Ecological Systems Theory which clarifies the role and importance of school and teachers as caretakers in a child's life. The examination of one child in particular, provided a wealth of data, leading to understanding of inclusion of children admitted in our school under the EWS/DG category of the RTE Act 2009, Section 12 (1)(c).

Educational Development in Post-Independence India

Education has always been an irreplaceable tool for social change and progress; it empowers the society to walk down the path of development and progress. Besides being a powerful tool to strengthen democracy, it is of special importance for the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of society, traditionally deprived of access to education and development resources.

India's struggle for independence came to an end in August, 1947 but it's still clutched in the endless loop of age old, deep rooted biases and prejudices. Ours is a society divided by an ancient caste system where only the representatives of upper castes and classes were born with the privilege and right to be educated, while the poor and lower castes were denied the right to education. Segregation and social exclusion in society have been a part of Indian Culture since time immemorial. The British rule served the same injustice, as formal education in schools was available only to the elite and upper classes. The report of Indian Education Commission chaired by W.W. Hunter, or other annual reports of the Provincial Governments reveal that there were different schools for different categories of students. There is also evidence to suggest that very often even within the compound of a single school, different sitting arrangements were made for the students of different caste backgrounds.

The Indian Constitution was framed with the vision to eradicate the deep seated caste based fragmentation of society. The Constitution made equality of status and of opportunity and social, economic and political justice, Fundamental Rights for all citizens amongst other rights.

Although the idea of compulsory education did not acquire centrality in the policy framework of post-independence Indian nation state, nonetheless, it secured a much faster expansion in the coming years. Eager to educate its citizens, the government opened schools at a fast pace. However, its policies vis-a-vis primary and secondary education were lacking in proper and adequate planning, implementation, pedagogy and resources. Despite the resources at its disposal, the education system was

noticeably failing to impart quality education to the masses and faced major challenges in the name of social inclusion and low literacy rates.

In the 1970s, the private sector boomed exponentially, offering better education facilities to the middle and upper classes. Private schools were the new age English medium schools for the upper classes, and the lower classes were left at the mercy of government schools. The stigma attached to government schools compelled the parents to transfer their children to private schools even with the fees being beyond their capacity. Private schools are associated with an opportunity for upward social mobility, and public schools, with a resignation to one's economic reality. Since the quality of education being provided in government schools has been consistently poor, it failed to curb the problem of social inequality and further widened the gap between classes.

Taking full advantage of the situation, the private sector rose quickly in the metropolitan areas and targeted parents who could pay, leaving the responsibility of catering to the marginalised sections of society on the government. This differentiated access to education fed into the system of segregation. While the marginalised continued to look towards the state and centre for their needs, the middle classes struggled to afford private education in order to secure the future for their children in the growing economic landscape. This initial segregation was further perpetuated with a boom in the availability of low-fee private schools catering to lower income families. The low cost private schools made a large group of population access private education – an option, still unavailable to the poorest of the poor.

As the contrast between the Private Schools and Government Schools increased and the consequent stratification deepened, there emerged a need to address the deteriorating problem of quality education. It clearly emerged that an integrated, equitable schooling system was necessary for a progressive, democratic society. An inclusive system was essential to challenge existing hierarchies and inequalities in the society and bridge the gap between the classes. The importance of Equity, for the purpose of delivering social justice and for the performance of an education system as a whole, was recognized.

Education is a right that flows directly from the right to life. The right to life and the dignity of an individual cannot be assured unless it is accompanied by the right to education. One of the Directive Principles of State Policy as contained in Article 45 of the Constitution of India states:

"The State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years." (Article 45, Constitution of India)

The Kothari Commission (1964-66) laid the foundation of the first National Policy on Education in 1968 with the mission to modernize the Indian education system. The 1968 and 1986-1992 National Education policies in India recognized education as a precondition for development and set out three critical issues in those policies – equity, accessibility and quality.

In 2002, the 86th amendment to the Indian Constitution introduced Article 21-A, making ‘The Right to Education’ a Fundamental Right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 served as the enabling legislation to make the right guaranteed by the Constitution effective. Of all the other far-reaching changes and amendments brought about by the Act, Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Education (RTE) has been the most controversial by far. ***The Section mandates all private unaided schools in the country to reserve 25% of the seats in Class I, or the entry level class in their school, for students from economically weaker sections (EWS), socially disadvantaged groups (DG), physically handicapped children and orphans and to provide free and compulsory education to them till Class VIII.*** The Act has the potential to impact 1.6 crore children from EWS and DG categories in the first eight years of implementation. This provision of the Act ensures inclusion of children from marginalised communities (defined as disadvantaged and weaker sections under Section 2 (d) and (e) of the Act) in private unaided schools.

The Act was enforced in April 2010, with rules framed by the state government regarding admission directly attacking the independence and autonomy of private unaided schools in matters of admission policy. The RTE Act brought to the fore that equality and equality of opportunity is a fundamental principle of democracy, and the fact that schools, all schools, serve social objectives. The intention underlying this provision was to ensure that all stakeholders in the field of education share the obligation of realizing the right to free and compulsory elementary education.

In its true spirit Section 12(1)(c) envisioned to create an environment that enabled children from different backgrounds to share knowledge on a common platform across caste, class and gender divides, with varying interests and ability, achieve their highest potential by studying in a shared classroom. It aimed to narrow down the class based division and to desegregate society. By specifying a minimum share of students who should be admitted in schools at the entry level, the mandate ensured that the child coming from the Disadvantaged Group is not isolated.

Recognising the challenges of social inclusion in a segregated society, the policy mandated integration starting at the school’s entry level grade. Guarding against “quick-fix social engineering”, the presence of the requirement is attributed to the “fact that children take time to socialise and teachers take time to develop new attitudes and pedagogic skills. With these children moving up, and a new cohort of children entering pre-school and Class I in each successive year, the school will gradually have a more diverse population spread across all classes. Progression at this pace will allow children the opportunity to grow up together and create bonds: bonds that can survive social walls.”¹

Section 12(1)(c) has a much deeper and longer lasting aim than to just level the playing field between the rich and the poor. The thinking echoes the longstanding belief that inclusion across classes, genders and castes does and will lead to a higher quality of learning for all children. The inclusion of socially diverse children in the same classroom enables children from varied socio cultural backgrounds to share world views. Studies and reports from all over the world show that more equitable education systems also achieve higher learning outcomes on an average and emphasise that inequality hurts not only the disadvantaged within a society, but society as a whole. Therefore, creation of a diversified and pluralist space of cultural

interaction within school is a precondition for its intervention or participation in the life of the outside community.

Ever since it came into force, the Act has met innumerable legal, administrative and financial obstacles. When The RTE bill was passed, responses to Section 12(1)(c) were quick and heated. Its inclusion in the Act and the implications it had (of economic and social inclusion) for all stakeholders was questioned and debated.

Supporters of private schooling worried about financial implications due to inadequate reimbursements by the government and saw the mandate as undue interference. Opinion was also divided on the mandate's impact on children themselves. A popular opinion was that potentially unbridgeable social distances between students admitted under the mandate and the rest of the students would lead to adverse consequences for those the mandate seeks to benefit. There was likewise worry about the potential fall in learning levels for the rest of the students as teachers get diverted to helping children without adequate learning support and an environment amiable to academics at home. Families from wealthier backgrounds spoke of a drop in learning and more interestingly, their discomfort at the sharing of resources by their children and their servant's children. Teachers spoke of their inability to cater to the differentiated learning speeds, fearing that curriculum would not be completed by year-end. Finally parents from EWS and DG backgrounds dreaded the treatment their children would receive in schools that had once fought so vehemently to keep them out.

Even as the debates continued, the Central Government exercising its power appointed the 1st day of April, 2010 as the date on which the provisions of the said Act would come into force. Private schools, which had previously not given admission to children from poor families, now had to admit as many as 25% of children from economically weaker sections and disadvantaged groups (Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Classes).

At the school level, the challenges of implementation of this provision included developing the criteria for admissions, fee reimbursement shortfalls with the State, budgetary adjustments required, overall school preparedness, in-service teacher training, socio-cultural dynamics of inclusive education and integration of the children admitted in this category in the wider school system.

Following the mandate, in the year 2009-2010, 10% students under the economically disadvantaged category were enrolled in RSJMS in the entry level class – the Nursery. 45 children from EWS and other DG were admitted, in the year 2011-2012. Since 2011, each year, 25% seats are allotted to children coming from EWS and DG categories, who study free of charge.

The objective of inclusive education can never be truly achieved without focussing on concrete material and cultural experiences of the hitherto excluded groups within the framework of equality principle and redistributive justice. All schools must be made capable of meeting individualised needs of all students and open their classroom to the analysis of existing disparities.

Did granting admissions address the issue of social inclusion? No. Merely giving admission to a child in the school did not guarantee inclusion. When our school enrolled students from the economically poor sections from the neighbourhood, we faced numerous challenges.

- The stark contrast between the students from affluent families and those enrolled under the RTE Act, led to their stereotyping as children who used bad language, were unhygienic, malnourished and messy.
- Teachers expressed their concern about catering to the diverse learning ability of children.
- Language was a barrier, as children from EWS and DG used Hindi and the school was an English medium school, leading to communication gap with their peers and teachers.
- These children came from deprived and in some cases dysfunctional backgrounds and many displayed symptoms of behavioural, emotional and psychological problems.
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In order to truly include these children in the functioning of the school whereby they could feel safe, valued and above all utilize the opportunities offered and actively participate in its functioning, a lot of effort was made. The challenges were overwhelming, but with each subsequent year the school machinery showed remarkable resilience and adapted itself to the new reality. The whole structure of the education system has and is still being modified to address these challenges.

With the enrolment of children from EWS and DG category, and keeping in mind the socio-emotional and physical well-being of each child, various practices were adopted to create an atmosphere of equality. Some of the notable modifications, adaptations and accommodations are:

- A uniform dress code was introduced at the entry level to eliminate signs of visual differences amongst students.
- Being an English medium school, RSJMS had to shift the medium of communication for the children and their families. The teachers gradually switch to English language and ensure preparedness of children for the same. Bilingual instructions are given to parents during parent-teacher meetings and orientation programmes. School circulars are bilingual.
- Weekly special classes are held for parents, wherein, teachers discuss proposed work for the week and teaching methodology. They are encouraged to reinforce concepts at home with help from teachers, and refrain from appointing services of private tutors.
- To facilitate understanding of parents of children admitted under the RTE Act and plug communication gaps, a ‘Buddy’ parent system was introduced. Parents of Non-EWS students volunteer their support as buddies to assist the parents and address their concerns.
- The school provides the children enrolled under the RTE Act free books, notebooks, stationary and uniforms.
- Being truly inclusive, the children enrolled under the RTE Act are also a part of school functions and morning assemblies. Costumes for various functions are provided to them at concessional rates.

- To combat cultural marginality, morning assemblies are planned around festivals associated with various cultural and religious communities. All festivals, be it Diwali, Eid or Easter, are celebrated with equal fervour.
- Unique talents and abilities among children are recognized and they are enrolled for training in their specific talent, be it sports, arts or/and music.
- Besides organizing motivational talks and story sessions, the school supplements the educational needs of the children admitted under the RTE Act with experiential learning, field trips and extracurricular activities.
- For classes Nursery to 2, parent volunteers bring fruits for the entire class and serve the assortment to all children in equal portions, thus providing for the deprived too.
- Children with behavioural and psychological problems are referred to the school's Learning Center comprising of special educators and counsellors who assist in the process of identification of the problem and its formal diagnosis. All low achievers are provided counselling in equal measure, irrespective of their background.
- Through a specifically designed life skills and value education programme, the school is inculcating the value of social inclusion in children. A period in class timetable has been set aside on teaching basic etiquettes and manners, through the school's Education Handbook.
- Teachers are encouraged to spend time with the students in order to understand their interests and backgrounds. Home visits are made to understand the contextual influences on child's learning. In case of absenteeism, teachers call up the parents to enquire about the child's wellbeing.
- Any practice highlighting differences in the economic backgrounds of children is discouraged. Birthday celebrations are restricted to sweets distribution. Children are advised not to bring expensive stationary, tiffin and other accessories. There is a prescribed meal plan to ensure that children don't feel inferior due to the kind of food they get to school. Irrespective of their background, all children are encouraged to keep their classrooms clean by using the available broom, dustpan or a cloth duster. Tasks are assigned equally to boys and girls. As biases based on gender or economic background creeps in early in the psyche of children, positive reinforcements are provided through conscious effort.
- School offers an important public space with potential to facilitate dialogue as it brings different socio-economic and religious groups together within the same spatial enclosure. The school is conscious of its role as an agent in offering a platform to foster understanding and bring together people from diverse groups.
- Every child is included under a health insurance scheme.

The above practices have led to improvement in the participation levels of the children admitted under the RTE Act. There has been a remarkable boost in their self-confidence and self-esteem.

The biggest hurdle that the school faced was in dealing with behavioural, emotional and psychological problems that the EWS children suffered from. Their problems varied from mild manifestations to those falling in severe categories.

Numerous studies were done and research carried out by the school counselors and teachers in order to get to the root of the problems and seek appropriate interventions. A deeper study unfolded a complex relationship between a child and the various environments the child moves in.

The examination of one child in particular, provided a wealth of data, leading to understanding of inclusion of these children in our school. This study involved a seven year old boy who has been diagnosed with ADHD and is at risk for ODD. The case provides a conceptual framework for understanding equity and inclusivity of children under disadvantaged category.

The overall experience of disadvantaged children with mental health problems is mostly unproductive and negative. Through this case study, educators will gain an understanding of these children and the world within which they operate. Educational interventions can then be implemented to meet their educational potential.

Karan's Background (name changed)

Karan is a 7 year old boy who studies in RSJMS under the category of economically weaker section. In Nursery, the child was new to the system of formal education. The teacher in-charge gave him enough time to adjust to the classroom environment. However, certain deviations were observed in his mannerisms, such as lack of speech, difficulty in comprehending teacher's instructions, using abusive language, drenching himself, shouting and running in the corridors and class. These behavioural problems further deteriorated with time resulting in yelling, name calling, spitting and damaging school property.

In order to understand Karan's deviant behaviour, the school counsellors and class teacher conducted many assessments. They visited Karan's house and interviewed his family members and neighbours. After all assessments, the details of Karan's traumatic background emerged.

Karan was living in a joint family comprising of father, grandparents, uncle and aunt in a slum situated in Delhi. His is a dysfunctional family with an environment of conflicts, fights, arguments and tension. His mother committed suicide due to constant fights and demand of dowry. He was one year and six months old when he lost his mother. His father is mostly unemployed and is an alcoholic. The father has criminal charges against him and often fights in the neighbourhood. The neighbours prefer to stay away from him and his family due to his tendency to harm people when drunk. They reported that he often abused Karan, both physically and verbally, and fought with other family members over finances. Due to the tainted family background, children in the neighbourhood did not interact with Karan; as a result he became socially withdrawn.

Karan's physical development was achieved at appropriate age. However, his cognitive development has been significantly delayed. He has a short attention span, poor problem solving skills, unclear speech, and limited vocabulary. His emotional and social development is severely affected. He is unable to manage his feelings due to which he has frequent mood swings and emotional outbursts. He is stubborn and has no fear of authority. His interpersonal skills are not developed. He feels insecure,

hesitant and anxious while interacting with his peer group. He is comfortable interacting with children older to him. He exhibits anxious attachment patterns, which results in dependency on a few people. He is a fussy eater and does not take a proper diet. He has frequent complaints of cough, cold and skin problems.

Karan's case study helped the teachers understand and empathize with the causal factors leading to behavioural deviations in such children and devise strategies based on the 'Systems Theory' by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989).

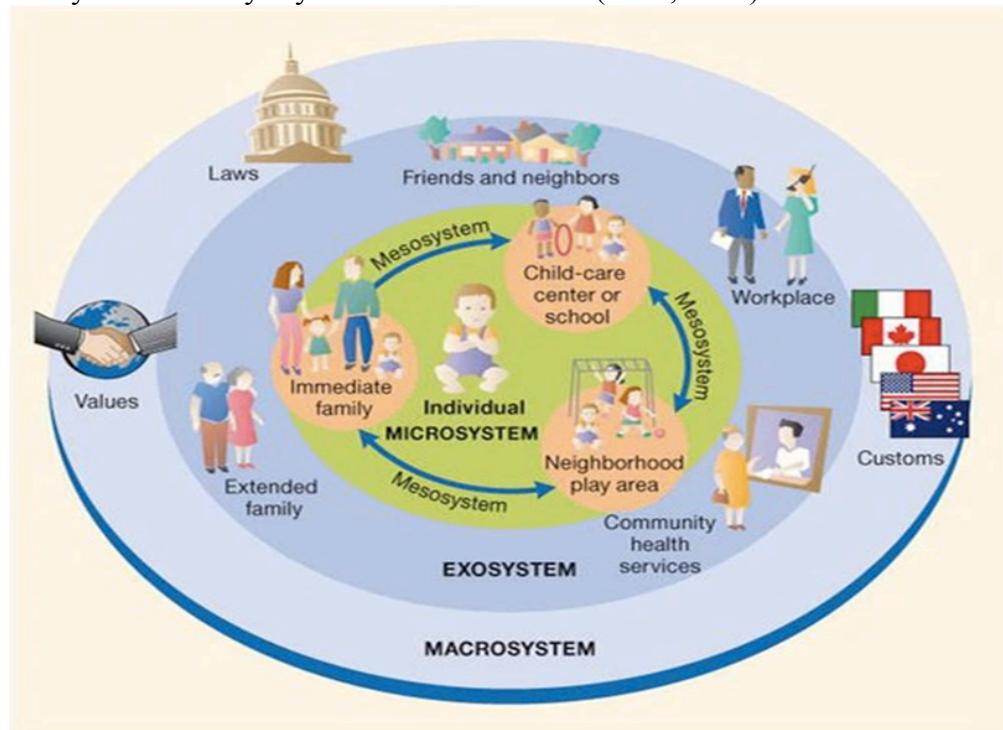


Figure 1: Ecological Systems Diagram adapted from Berk, L. E. (2000)
 Home environments, schools and other places where the child spends considerable time or which directly or indirectly affect the child's well-being are viewed as ecologies. What happens in one part of the system can have a ripple effect on others (Roffey, 2008). Adaptive and maladaptive behaviours may be either augmented or diminished within the system.

Ecological systems theory provides a means to describe how a child's behavioural pattern is influenced by the layers of systems in his environment. It became imperative that we examined whether the 'systems' provided safe, secure and positive environment to the students enrolled under EWS and DG category. Examinations were made of each child enrolled under EWS category followed by relevant interventions to foster well-being.

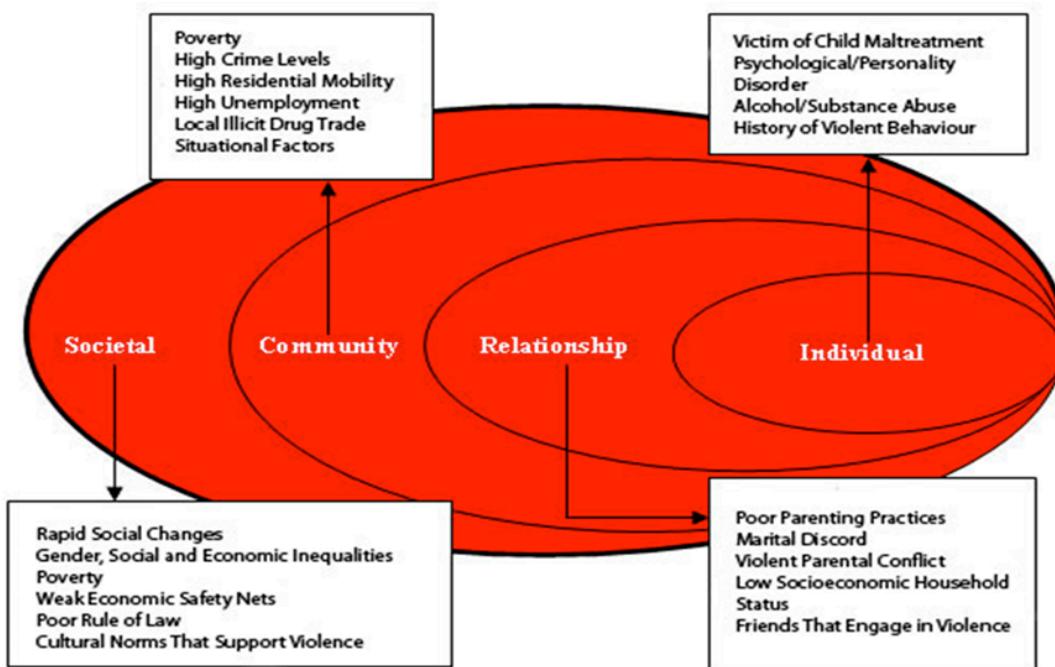


Figure 2: The ecological framework: examples of risk factors at each level (WHO)
Keeping the child in the centre of his system, we examined the various systems and the interactions between these systems, which are-

(A) Micro System- The micro system is the immediate setting in which the child engages in face-to-face interaction. Such a setting is considered to have a direct impact on experience. Home is often the first and most significant micro system in a child's life, another being his school and neighbourhood.

Most of the students from the EWS in our school have been brought up in dysfunctional families. Due to the absence of academic inputs at home, their cognitive skills are not well developed. In Karan's case, prolonged marital conflict between the parents, after his birth, led to his neglect, inconsistent discipline and hostility towards him. This resulted in his poor health, low cognitive ability, difficult temperament, unclear speech and limited vocabulary.

(B) Meso System- The meso system comprises of the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings of the developing person (e.g. the relations between home, school and neighbourhood).

Ignorant of the academic curriculum, parents are unable to assess the academic progress of their children. There are constant conflicts between families and the neighbourhood they reside in, with fights over possession of scarce resources, such as water and space. Their neighbourhood comprises of families who indulge in anti-social behaviours such as gambling, alcoholism, physical fights, and verbal abuse. Due to financial constraints and lack of resources, their health and nutritional needs are also not met.

In this case, Karan's parents had no involvement and contribution in his academic learning. Children in the neighbourhood did not interact with him. This explained his insecurity, low self-esteem and social withdrawal.

(C) Exo System- The exo system refers to settings in which the child is not directly involved but in which events occur that affect what happens in the setting in which he or she is involved. Exo systems may include the parent's place of work, network of friends, medical facilities, school and government policies.

The families of EWS children live in financial strain and parental stress, which in turn affects their mental health. They are unable to receive appropriate health services such as vaccinations, nutritional advice and general physical examination.

In this case, Karan and his family have been socially excluded from the community. He did not receive health services such as speech therapy, counselling and general physical examination which worsened his symptoms of ADHD.

(D) Macro System- The macro system is the broadest ecological contextual system, with which the child does not have any direct experience. It describes the culture in which individuals live. Cultural contexts include developing and industrialized countries, socio-economic status, poverty, and ethnicity. Economic and social policies that maintain socio-economic inequalities between people. Social and cultural norms such as those around male dominance over women, parental dominance over children. People from poor background are identified in urban areas with chaotic, disorganized lives, absence of parental ambition for children and a tendency to addiction. Karan and other children from EWS background faced prejudice in class. This further caused low self-esteem and withdrawal. On the other hand, in some cases, it manifested in rebellious behaviour and aggression.

It will take a while to change cultural values associated with poverty. When India becomes an egalitarian society, perceptions about poverty will also change. With RTE Act in practice one can be hopeful that positive changes would occur in the society making social inclusion a reality.

Interventions Done At the Systems Level

Interventions were done at each level. Interactions between the various systems were carefully examined and better, workable and sustainable solutions were sought.

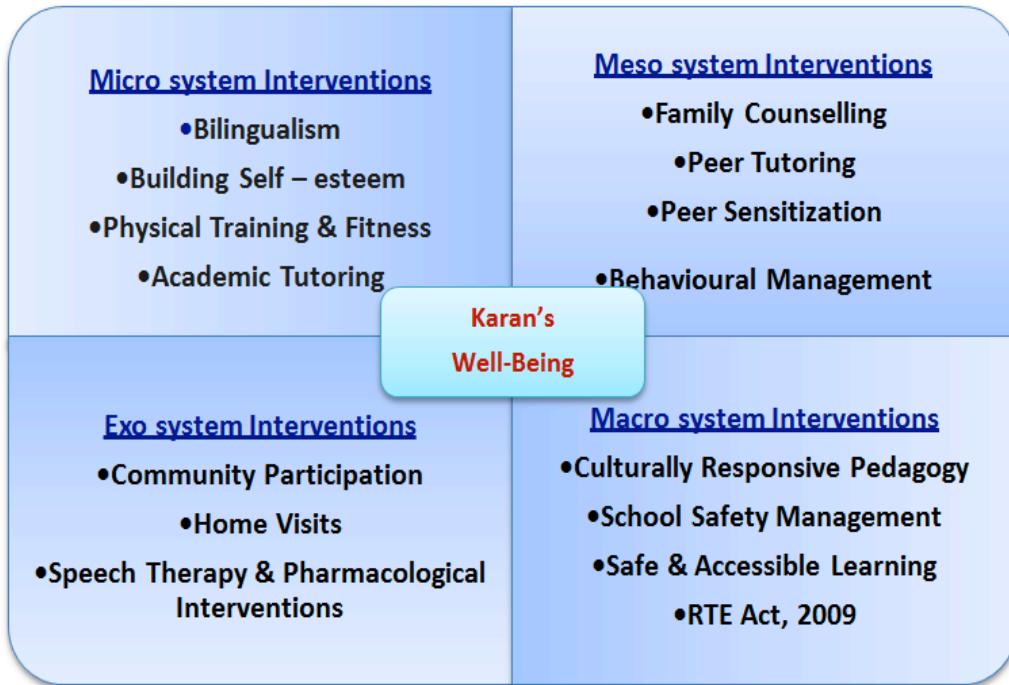


Figure 3: Karan's Well-being across Systems

(A) Interventions at Micro Level & Meso level

To inculcate a sense of belonging and improving their self-esteem, unique talents and abilities are being recognized in each child and they are enrolled in the activities as per their interests and capabilities. Usage of English Language has been replaced by bilingual teaching. Participation of children from disadvantaged category in various functions and classroom activities is ensured.

In this case, Karan's diet played a crucial role in his physical and mental health. His basic needs of health and nutrition were taken care of. Karan is served milk and fruits in school. He is enrolled in physical training whereby a physical trainer has been assigned to train him in athletics. The class teacher periodically apprises his classmates and their parents about the problems faced by Karan and encourage them to be sensitive towards his needs. A specialized education and behavioural management plan was shared with his grandmother, care-givers, teachers and other healthcare providers.

Teachers undertake home visits of these children and assess the chronic strains or discrete life events associated with their academic and behavioural problems and counsel family members accordingly.

(B) Interventions at Exo level And Macro level

The school implements a culturally responsive pedagogy for imparting knowledge that respects diversity and creates a safe, inclusive and respectful learning environment.

Karan's grandmother was told to get the child assessed for ADHD, speech and special needs. Required evaluations were done by medical practitioners and the school

arranged and paid for all the expenses. The child is receiving pharmacological intervention to control his symptoms.

The RTE Act is a huge initiative for removing economic disparities ensuring equalization of educational opportunities. In light of the RTE Act, the National Curriculum Framework (2005) has laid down a clear context of inclusive education and practices. Teachers realize the value of accepting each child as a unique individual and educate children with economic disadvantages along with regular children, under the same roof.

Conclusion

Indian society continues to remain stratified as before with socio economic inequalities. But school education has had unprecedented expansion with a demand from historically excluded sections of society including EWS/DG's. Today almost every parent, from rural or urban areas, rich or poor, wishes to educate his child. The overall structure of school education still remains stratified with graded hierarchies between school systems (Elite private schools, Low Fee Private schools, Government schools). The provisions laid down in the RTE Act, 2009 create some space for disadvantaged children and provide them access, which they can never hope for otherwise. This is a progressive change. Since social inclusion means rendering classrooms inclusive, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory provides a theoretical lens to create an inclusive space for teachers and students where 'each' child is included and his well-being ensured. Not just survival in the classrooms, but thriving in inclusive classrooms.

Any change that affects the social fabric of a society seems difficult initially, but it is a gift and calls for change. If we want to catalyse a shift to thriving cultures of teaching, we need to value and train teachers to practise and promote well-being in their school on a daily basis. Schools have a huge responsibility of achieving this goal.

Based on the interventions done as per the Systems Theory to help Karan, interventions for many other children with similar conditions and backgrounds were done. We are happy to state that we have been receiving positive feedbacks from the children, their families, friends and teachers.

This is a time to question our underlying beliefs, attitudes and assumptions and discover ways to reinvent the system. Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory (1977, 1979) is a perfect model, which creates common spaces for teachers and students to come together to use conversations, enquiries and well-being practices to build up a healthy community.

We have to make a choice as to whether we want to survive or thrive.

Footnote:

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Contact email: manju.rajput@gmail.com