

Laying the Foundations for Inclusive Education in Preschools

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Abstract

This article discusses a programme, Tarang- Transforming Schools. Tarang is a program conducted by Sethu Center (Goa) with the objective of guiding preschools to develop practices that are inclusive in nature. The program is based on a two year project conducted by Sethu with 11 preschools in Goa during which the Tarang team worked with the teachers and management of the preschools to explore how to develop preschools that address the learning needs of all children right from the moment children are admitted into the school till they leave. This meant putting in place a program with evidence based practices that support inclusion through training, setting up systems, and mentoring. The article highlights the key components of the program based on the findings of the project.

Keywords: *inclusive practices, preschool education, learning needs, Universal Design for Learning*

Introduction

In Manovikas Pre-School, Madhurima, a teacher has cleared a space in the center of her classroom. She has drawn squares with letters in each of them. Each line of squares represents a different set of CVCs (consonant-vowel-consonant) combinations of the vowel 'e'. The first line has consonants, h, p, r, m, d, and f. The second line has just an 'e' while the third line has another set of consonants – d, n, m, t. Children are sitting around the empty space waiting for their turn. As a child's name is called he/she gets to jump on the first line and say the letter. The teacher makes the sound and they repeat it. This continues for each line and at the end they have to guess the word. As the game progresses children learn to blend the sounds of the CVC word without even realizing that they are learning to read. Madhurima says that this is possible only because she was trained in the Universal Design for Learning. Her earlier lesson delivery would have consisted of making students repeat each of the sounds 5 times in a group and then writing them down. Now her way of teaching is transformed. Madhurima says, "Now my class is active and students are excited to learn!"

Welcome to 'Tarang- Transforming Schools Project.' The project was started in response to the number of preschool children that were coming to Sethu Center for Child Development and Family Guidance with difficulties in learning simple preschool skills like number value, letter sound awareness or simply labeling

objects. Yet, when taught by members of the Sethu team, these children learned skills quite easily. It was obvious that the difficulties in learning were less to do with the child's inability to learn and more to do with the structured approach and interactive strategies used at Sethu. It was felt that if preschool teachers were trained in similar methods, they would benefit children with special needs who were part of their preschool.

The program was implemented in the following manner over a period of two years.

1. Email invites sent to 65 preschools where Sethu children attended inviting principals for an orientation program on inclusive education.
2. Principals of 25 preschools attended and were given an orientation program on the aims and objectives of the 'Tarang Transforming Schools' project and invited to sign up for the program.
3. 11 schools which signed up were rated on a checklist for inclusive education before attending the program to determine their performance on various aspects of inclusive education.
4. Two-year training and mentoring program attended by 11 preschools.

The end of this two-year project resulted in a state culminating in a state symposium in which a manual on the Tarang Transforming Schools program was released. Team members as well as teachers and principals shared their experiences and learnings at this symposium. In this article, I

will share the results of those experiences which have helped shape a more comprehensive preschool training program geared towards including all children.

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum (DAC)- A developmentally appropriate curriculum is a set of skills along with teaching strategies and the evaluation methods for each skill which are age appropriate and presented in a sequential format. It involves an in-depth understanding of how children develop and learn at various ages and stages. Following a DAC ensures that difficulties in learning are not due to content which is beyond the maturational age of the child and effectively eliminates one factor when addressing learning challenges in children. One observation that we made while working with schools was that very few schools had DACs. This was especially true in the subjects of writing and math. For example, some schools expected children to hold a pencil and form letters long before their motor skills of that age were developed. This was due to pressure that schools face from parents who assume *‘if their child cannot write, he/she is not learning anything’*. Thus, difficulties in Math or writing were often the result of skills being above the level of the child rather than a disability. This absence of a DAC in all preschools, resulted in the need to develop a DAC. This was done in four areas – reading, math, writing and language by the Sethu team. While reading, math and writing are addressed in all preschools, there is no mention of a separate language curriculum in spite of the fact that the medium of instruction in preschools is English but the majority of children come from a non-English speaking background. Thus the curriculum included language as a separate subject. This provided children who did not speak English at home with opportunities to learn English systematically and practically rather than simply through reading of words which often had no meaning in books. An example of the language curriculum at nursery level includes responding to greeting, following instructions, identifying objects in various environments and talking about oneself in simple sentences. By focusing on the children and their environment, language is made relevant and meaningful.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)- UDL has formed the basis of most of the curriculum transactions while teaching.

The concept of UDL is based on research-based findings that children demonstrate great variability in the way they respond to instruction. One of the theoretical underpinnings is the concept of multiple intelligences proposed by Howard Gardiner in 1983. UDL begins with the belief that diversity in the classroom is normal. It exists in terms of children learning strengths, challenges, interests and needs. classroom. Therefore, there is no ‘one size fits all’ system of learning. to address this diversity. Meyer and Rose (2014) further elaborate on the term universal design for learning by stating; By **‘universal’** we mean every learner- not just those traditionally seen as belonging in the middle of the bell curve (the mythical average student) or just those traditionally seen as belonging in the margins. The goal of UDL is to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to develop into expert learners. By **‘design’** we mean that UDL is intentional, purposeful and planned. The variability of learners is a given and types of systematic variability are predicted at the very beginning (when a curriculum or lesson is being designed). By **‘learning’** we mean that all individuals are challenged and supported in meaningful ways to grow toward expertise as learners.

UDL proposes that curriculum be delivered keeping three principles in mind. The principle of multiple means of representation, the principle of multiple means of expression and the principle of multiple means of engagement. The first principle (representation) requires that all material being presented must be in the form of as many sensory modes as possible; auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic. The visual mode includes pictures, videos and print. When teaching the child adjectives like rough and smooth, the child should hear the word, see the written word and actually feel the objects to understand what roughness or smoothness feels like. When teaching the child the value of a number - three, the child should see three objects such as coins, clap three times, count three of her friends and see the number three on a clock, flash card and calendar. By presenting each number in different modes we allow the child to learn through the sensory modality that suits them best.

In the second principle (expression) children are provided with different ways to express what they have learnt . The traditional methods of

answering questions learned by rote do not give children a way to express what they have learned because they measure only one way of expression. By giving the children opportunities to speak, draw, point, or even act, we provide different ways to express what has been learned. For example, while learning prepositions in language, a child might not be able to say 'the pencil is under the book' but if the child can demonstrate how to put the pencil under the book we know that the child has understood the concept of under. Similarly, the child may not say the color blue when asked 'what color is this?' but if asked to select the color blue from a group of colors does so accurately.

The third principle (engagement) speaks to the heart of teaching-learning, based on the belief that learning must be relevant, motivating and fun for the child. Activities that are reinforcing, engaging and stimulating help engage children. For example, when teaching the concept of big and small, children can be given worksheets of their favorite cartoon characters in big and small mode (fun). They can be shown big and small objects from their everyday life – big and small spoons, bottles, plates and pencils (relevant). Alternatively, they can be asked to go on a treasure hunt/ nature walk and collect big and small stones, leaves and flowers (motivating).

Initially teachers struggled to write and deliver UDL plans. The following steps were taken to help them become more confident in delivering the lessons.

1. Teachers were encouraged to write lesson plans in the UDL format that was given to them during training.
2. The Tarang team checked these lessons and made suggestions to help them improve the lessons. This was done along with the coordinator of the school in order to facilitate her ability to monitor future lessons.
3. Teachers were encouraged to give lessons that were corrected
4. They were then rated on rubric that was developed by the Tarang team
5. Whenever necessary teachers were coached in the class itself to help them deliver the lesson more effectively.

6. The feedback was shared with them individually first and then with the group (class wise)
7. The coordinator was encouraged to score lessons in the presence of the Tarang team member
8. Every month, the Sethu team member would deliver a UDL lesson which teachers of that class would observe.

Protocol for Children with Special Needs- The practices listed above benefit all children, not just children with special needs and are considered the foundation for any inclusive school. However, to be truly inclusive the school must have a clear-cut policy for children with special needs right from the time of admission to their entire schooling experience.

Right from very start schools have to decide whether they are truly welcoming of ALL children. The attitude or philosophy of the school has to be reflected in the policy of the school along with the practices. We define policy as all communications in writing which express the views of the school towards inclusion. Examples of this included a school that chose to print the following statement in the cover of their calendar- ***'We are an inclusive school and welcome all learners'***. Another school clearly advertised their welcoming attitude towards diversity by mentioning that they have a resource room to support children with special needs.

Practices are defined as any activities which are undertaken regularly with the intention of supporting inclusion. These include sensitization programs for parents, having inclusion as a topic of discussion for staff meetings, support in the form of an assistant to help the teacher in the classroom among others.

Currently, the team is working with the management of the preschools and the teachers to develop a protocol for children with special needs right from the time of admission up to the time they leave the preschool.

The following points will be addressed in the protocol

1. Admission- How do we ensure that children with special needs are admitted in a fair manner? Should there be a fixed number of children with special needs so that there is a quota on a first come first served basis. Or

should there be a general admission for all children? The advantage of this is that every child gets a fair chance for admission but the drawback is that if there are too many children with special needs in one class there may not be resources available.

2. Sensitization- Sensitization of all stakeholders ensures that the philosophy of inclusion is given prominence while shaping attitudes of stakeholders and giving them an opportunity to address their concerns. Schools in this program have committed to at least two sensitization programs a year- one for parents and one for other stakeholders like teachers, non-teaching staff and management. A sensitization can include any topic that shapes understanding of the philosophy of inclusion from the perspective of the audience. In one school the sensitization consisted of introducing parents to the concept of the DAC so that parents would understand why language was included as new subject or why writing was not addressed at the nursery level.

3. Skill based evaluation - The use of a DAC ensures that each child is tested on each skill in the curriculum when the skill is completed. This eliminates the need for an exam at the end of each term where knowledge is measured in terms of how much a child rote learns. This system of skill based evaluation allows teachers to see exactly where the child has difficulty while then ensuring that child gets

the necessary support to catch up/strengthen that skill.

4. Support system- The support system forms the final part of the protocol for addressing learning issues for children with special needs. How is the support provided once learning challenges are identified.. Some schools have resource rooms where a pull-out system is practiced. Other schools do not have the space or finances for resource rooms. Some suggestions like a parent volunteer group, an in-class assistant or after school coaching are up for discussion. The appointment of one person who will coordinate and liaise between teachers and the child with special needs is another support that schools can consider

The formation of a protocol has to be addressed in the context of the resources of the school. These include financial, space and human resources to name a few. The point to be stressed here is that schools must have a protocol so that children with special needs do not slip through cracks in the system as each new challenge surfaces.

Inclusive education means that systemic barriers that exist in the education system must be addressed and dismantled to ensure education is available for all children. The article above has addressed some of these barriers, however one must always remember that inclusion is a work in progress.