

# Nurturing and Supporting Children with Intellectual Disability: Implications for Education

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the conceptual foundations of intellectual disabilities and their implications for education have been discussed by laying emphasis upon the nature and needs of children with this disability. The paper is an attempt to critically analyse the provisions and measures for the wellbeing of children with intellectual disability. The paper presents intellectual disability in an integrated manner together with the search for its implications in education. It can be reiterated that parents as well as teachers make a tremendous impact on the lives of children, especially those with intellectual disability. There is a significant need to intervene in the circumstances of such children in order to emerge as “better teachers”, by evaluating the gross realities of the educational systems. The paper highlights the challenges and difficulties encountered by children with intellectual disabilities in inclusive settings, the implications for teachers, and the role of pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs.*

*Keywords: Children with special needs, disability, inclusive education*

## Introduction

A person and his/her cognition consists of intellectual or cognitive processes which make the person understand their inner and outer world, emotions, aspirations, psychological needs, temperamental inclinations, habits and behaviours. Cognition refers to the psychological processes of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses. The seven basic processes underlying cognition involve attention, perception, memory, concept formation, concrete and abstract thinking, planning and problem solving, and meta-cognition; which should be developed and enhanced in an individual (Auluck, 2007).

There is a strong inter-relationship between an individual's cognition and intelligence. General

intelligence refers to the capacity arising from the effectively working cognitive processes. According to Thorndike (1920), intelligence can be categorized into three major types - concrete, social and abstract intelligence. Concrete intelligence refers to the ability of an individual to comprehend actual situations and to react to them adequately and social intelligence involves the ‘ability to understand and manage other people to act wisely in human relations’ (Thorndike, 1920). On the other hand, abstract intelligence is human enquiry at the levels of neural, cognitive, functional, and logical from a bottom-up processing approach. Another eminent psychologist, Howard Gardener (2006), evolved a multiple intelligence theory which proposes that intelligence in any individual is multi-faceted and involves linguistic, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, musical, interpersonal,

intrapersonal and naturalist intelligences. Logical-mathematical intelligence refers to the ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically. Linguistic intelligence involves the ability to effectively manipulate language to express oneself rhetorically or poetically. Spatial intelligence is the ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems. Musical intelligence encompasses the capabilities of recognizing and composing musical pitches, tones, and rhythms. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is the ability to use one's mental abilities to coordinate one's own bodily movements. Interpersonal intelligence refers to the ability to understand and discern the feelings and intentions of others. Intrapersonal intelligence refers to the ability to understand one's own feelings and motivations.

Since the intelligence of children with an intellectual disability is impaired to different degrees, their cognition gets affected according to their specific difficulties. Parents and teachers need to be mindful of this fact when interacting with children with intellectual disability. Intellectual disability refers to the condition of an extremely diverse group of individuals, which range from children with severe developmental disabilities to young adults with mild delays, who are sometimes indistinguishable from others. Intellectual disability is characterized by specific limitations in general mental abilities and adaptive functioning which emerge during the course of children's development (APA, 2013). Such limitations are evident in comparison to others of the same age, gender, and social-cultural background. All individuals with Intellectual disability show significantly low intellectual functioning. These individuals have problems perceiving and processing new information, learning quickly and efficiently, applying knowledge and skills to solve novel problems, thinking creatively and flexibly, and responding rapidly and accurately. In children approximately five years of age and older, intellectual functioning is measured using a standardized, individually administered intelligence test, popularly known as

Intelligent Quotient (IQ).

Individuals with Intellectual Disability show identifiable deficits in adaptive functioning. Adaptive functioning refers to how effectively individuals cope with common life demands and how well they meet the standards of personal independence expected of someone of their particular age group, social-cultural background, and community setting (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While intellectual functioning refers to people's ability to learn information and solve problems, adaptive functioning refers to their typical level of success in meeting the day-to-day demands of society in an age-appropriate manner. DSM-V Manual identifies three domains of adaptive functioning: conceptual, social, and practical. These domains were identified by using a statistical procedure called factor analysis to determine groups of skills that tend to co-occur in individuals with developmental disabilities. To be diagnosed with Intellectual Disability, individuals must show impairment in at least one domain (Weis, 2013). Usually, children with Intellectual Disability experience problems in multiple areas, described below:

- Conceptual skills which includes understanding language, speaking, reading, writing, counting, telling time, solving math problems, the ability to learn and remember information and skills.
- Social skills involving interpersonal skills, following rules, social problem-solving, understanding others, making and keeping friends.
- Practical skills, which includes activities of daily living like personal care, safety, home activities, school/work skills, recreational activities, and using money.

It is pertinent to keep in mind that Intellectual Disability is characterized by low intellectual functioning and problems in adaptive behavior. Many people erroneously believe that Intellectual Disability is determined solely by IQ testing; but deficits in adaptive functioning are equally

necessary for the diagnosis. For example, a child with an IQ of 65 but with no problems in adaptive functioning would not be diagnosed with Intellectual Disability. Finally, all individuals with Intellectual Disability show limitations in intellectual and adaptive functioning early in life. Although some people are not identified as having Intellectual Disability until they are adults, they must have histories of intellectual and daily-living problems, beginning in childhood. This age-of-onset requirement differentiates Intellectual Disability from other disorders characterized by problems with intellectual and adaptive functioning, such as Alzheimer's Dementia (i.e., cognitive deterioration seen in older adults).

### **Specific Needs of Children with Intellectual Disability**

There are some predominant features of the functioning of the mind which can be identified in 'Children with Intellectual Disability' (CWID). Children with intellectual disability have difficulty in learning because their intellectual functions show incomplete development in terms of everyday behaviours; such as observation, memory, analyses and generalised thinking. They show concrete thinking, rather than abstract thinking, and possess simpler world views rather than complex ones. The mistake we commit is of dragging them into our own world. Since parents and other family members play a very important role in their education, they should avoid imposing their standards of judgments on CWID. Furthermore, CWID take more time than others to move from others' regulation to self-regulation and therefore we must patiently give them that time to make the transition.

Another significant issue is in understanding the barriers to growth and a fuller life of children with intellectual disability. Such barriers include a lack of appropriate interventions, education and training, work opportunities, impoverished social learning situations, non- understanding of psychological needs including social and

emotional needs, and non-expectations of their role and responsibilities. There is also an immense stigma attached to Intellectual Disability which leads to faulty attitudes towards CWID; arising due to a lack of knowledge regarding CWID in society at large. The attitudes towards CWID are manifested explicitly in the non-acceptance, neglect and marginalization of individuals with intellectual disability. The utilitarian notions of the larger society, including their own family, grossly undermines their potential and abilities.

Sinclair and Franklin (2000) provide a very helpful explanation of the primary reasons for, and the benefits of, including children with intellectual disability in decision-making. It is essential that children with intellectual disability be provided opportunities to participate meaningfully, for the enhancement of their intellectual development and to build adaptive skills and independence. It is advisable to conceive of the participation of children with intellectual disabilities in factors that influence their lives, on three different levels. First, children must be given the right to make decisions about the most basic aspects of their lives, such as their preference of food, clothing and so on. This lack of everyday decision-making can contribute to developmental delay, lethargy and greater levels of dependence in children with intellectual disability. Without regular opportunities to make basic decisions, children with an intellectual disability will not be prepared for making more challenging decisions about their lives and will therefore continue to be dependent on others.

Another level of choice-making involves their participation in major decision-making that can have a lasting impact on their lives, such as undergoing medical treatment, and choices about schooling. During a process of de-institutionalization, these decisions might include where they would like to live and with whom. Ensuring that parents/caretakers have the skills to assist children rather than make decisions on their behalf, is especially important when children reach an age at which they would typically take increasing responsibility of their own lives (WHO, 2010).

The progression of involving a child in these levels will not only improve the quality of life for that individual child and his or her family; it will also ensure the development of daily living skills and independence, thereby ensuring that these children are able to be productive members of their families and wider society. The skills needed to make choices and decisions regarding one's life are dependent as much on experience as they are on age and ability, including any impairment.

### **Children with Intellectual Disability in Inclusive Settings**

The persons with intellectual disability encounter immense challenges. Some of these challenges include inadequate conceptual learning, which creates confusion in comprehending the demands of living and one's environment. Furthermore, the piling up of experiences of failure kills the initiative for learning, building up a resistance towards it instead. Frequent rejections of parents and others, and a lack of positive experiences in general, creates severe blows to the self-image of CWID; causing many emotional and behavioural difficulties. They are forced to have to deal with serious deprivations and insults as well. The majority of children with intellectual disability have no access to education, training, employment and other opportunities that help us live a life of dignity. They are denied the normal pleasures of life and constantly have to cope with their dependency on other people. There is a lot of social stigma, isolation, neglect and ridicule, a lack of learning opportunities, schooling and productive work that accompanies a learning disability (UNESCO, 2009).

The parents of children with intellectual disability deal with a loss of self-image and the consequent grief, sadness and frustration which is a long internal struggle. They often lack proper understanding about intellectual disability and its impacts on the person. They have a need for building up psychological and physical resources, and to manage the demands of time and energy with patience. The parents often struggle, due to

lack of required support services.

There are several misconceptions about persons with intellectual disabilities prevailing in our society. One such misconception is that they always remain as children; stubborn and aggressive in most circumstances. Another misconception is that they cannot understand what is being told to them, so other individuals tend to treat them as objects. It is also wrongly believed that they are unable to control their impulses, and hence they cannot learn self-discipline and self-regulation.

### **Inclusive Education: Implications for Different Stakeholders**

In inclusive school settings parents, teachers, school authorities and other community members have more significant roles to play by providing more efforts to guide children with intellectual disability. Besides, parental care and a conducive school culture are all beneficial to the development of children with intellectual disability and their integration into society. Auluck (2007) has recommended some provisions for different stakeholders working for the betterment of children with intellectual disabilities, as summarised below:

**Role of the Parents:** Parents should explain the needs of their child to teachers the while or before admitting the child in the school. Parents should consider discussing their child's abilities, difficulties, strengths, needs, and past performance regarding learning, while communicating with school authorities. Parents should inform teachers about certain precautions and measures to be taken while interacting with their children during co-curricular activities, and about particular areas for their child's improvement. The parents can serve as volunteers in the school so as to get to know the school practices and be familiar with the teachers, as well as to support the school to promote a culture of mutual care and support.

**Role of School Authorities:** The school should adjust their demands and expectations according to the abilities of children with intellectual disability and align them with the expectations of parents.



The child's study should be arranged in a quiet and undisturbed area by setting up a regular school-home schedule which would allow for reasonable breaks in between tasks. The child should be reminded of the activities of the day before she/he attends school and be reminded of the required behaviours and be praised in order to reinforce good behaviours.

**Role of the Teachers:** Teacher must adopt the same strategies to help children with intellectual disability. The child should be guided to repeat the learned contents of the day in order to facilitate thinking and memory. Every opportunity should be captured in daily life to teach the child. For instance, by directing the child's attention to words on signboards, encouraging child to calculate change when making purchases, reading descriptions on packages, and reading subtitles when watching television. The learning matter should be broken down into smaller tasks with steps and the child should be able to learn at his/her own pace. The child should be helped by using concrete examples and materials to understand abstract concepts. The lessons should be revised and demonstrated for the child by providing examples before working on exercises. The child can be requested to repeat the instruction in order to ensure that he/she understands the demands of the task. Teachers should make use of multi-sensory learning materials to enhance learning; such as pictures, music, stories, charts and so on. Teachers should also make use of different computer software for practice with such children.

**Role of Peer Support Systems:** The family and school should try to create a strong peer support system for the child in the classroom, while doing activities. The school should also arrange a patient and helpful peer to sit next to the child and to offer help when needed (Auluck, 2007).

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

First of all, we should begin by discussing the broad aim and purpose of education. Education should not to be equated with academic learning.

It has a larger purpose encompassing all aspects of one's being, by building upon the vast repertoire of knowledge. Education adds complex concepts and abstraction, enhancing the richness of our imagination and thinking, and sharpens our intellectual functions. If parents and teachers keep reminding themselves about the above, it will change their whole approach and interactions with a child / adult with intellectual disability. While helping individuals with intellectual disability, our own approach towards teaching and learning should change depending upon the needs and requirements of the child.

Education, when conceived holistically, can contribute immensely to the overall development of a child, which includes cognition, emotion, and behaviour. It involves better self-direction and self-regulation, emotional and social well-being, sense of self-worth, and thereby enables the individual to become a better learner. It would enhance flexibility of mind, widen the horizons of thinking, and enhance one's capacity for adaptation and an enhanced quality of life

Auluck (2007) suggested that the need for a paradigm shift is required in the minds of professionals and parents, from the prevalent medical to social model; from Welfare to Rights perspective and the shift from disability to diversity, in order to understand persons with intellectual disability. The implication of this shift would be to divert attention from the disabilities and problems of the children with intellectual disabilities. There are professional and vocational programmes which can be initiated for children with intellectual disabilities - adult training and employment, family support services, adult residential facility, awareness and advocacy.

There are some conflicting views between parents and schools with regard to the learning abilities of children with intellectual disabilities. The parents often suffer deep emotional conflicts due to the deplorable conditions of their child, which gets further aggravated due to a lack of acceptance and sensitivity of other people towards him/her. There should be a better sense social responsibility

towards individuals with intellectual disability. The role of teachers becomes highly significant then, as they should give due respect and recognition, and be able to attend to the needs of all special learners in the schools. There must be “inclusion” in regular mainstream schools as well as special schools, as a matter of public policy. There should be an inclusion curriculum for various Teacher Education programmes in the country. All such changes would help in bringing about meaningful improvement in the mind-sets and attitudes of all individuals towards persons with intellectual disabilities in the society at large.

The teachers of persons with intellectual disability tend to struggle and face challenges as well. They require inner transformation in terms of attitudes and values. They should be able to understand and manage the developmental levels and needs of each student in the class. Teachers must try to design appropriate goals, programs, and assessments for each individual student. They should maintain motivation despite encountering a very slow process of change and development. Teachers frequently face a lack of participation and support from parents, which makes it difficult for them to reach out to students with intellectual disability.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Nurturing and supporting children with intellectual disability is a great learning and transformational experience for all the individuals who consistently work with them. It is a rare opportunity to have insights into the functioning of the human mind, and for inner growth. Any attempt to bring about change can be successful only when there is a paradigm shift from a self-centric approach to a other-centric view. We must value, understand and appreciate persons with intellectual disability completely. We need to accept less-than-perfect ways of doing and being, develop patience and perseverance, and nurture more respect for them. There should be an availability of growth opportunities in the form of appropriate education, work, friendships, recreational facilities and support services for

families. What needs to be highlighted is the fact that the society at large fails to see the strengths of children with intellectual disabilities and focuses primarily on their limitations instead. The point is that CWID possess enormous strengths – a capacity for love and joy, freedom from biases and prejudices, purity of mind and freedom from egoism, warmth in relationships and perseverance despite difficulties in learning. These strengths must be upheld and nurtured by other significant members of society, including parents, teachers, the community and so on.

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