

Inclusion: Moving Towards Reality

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Abstract

A teacher can make all the difference especially when it comes to Inclusive classrooms. What is needed is a change in attitude that only a teacher can bring about. Movies like 'Black' and 'Tare Zameen Par' appreciated by most people, including educationists, for aptly showing how a good teacher could transform a student's life. But how sensitised are teachers today, when it comes to acceptance of special children in mainstream classrooms? Children with special needs are facing challenges majorly due to barriers in the environment, indifferent attitude of students, teachers and administrators and absence of skilled workforce. As public spaces, schools must be marked by the values of equality, social justice and respect for diversity, as well as of the dignity and rights of children. An enabling learning environment is one where children feel secure, where there is absence of fear, and which is governed by relationships of equity and equality. The failure to provide this will result in the failure of the system, and hence needs to be treated as the utmost priority.

Key Words: *Inclusive classroom, teacher-student relationship, education, schooling*

Are we honestly inclusive? Can we have a completely inclusive educational environment in near future? Is it possible to make the society inclusive through acts or legislations? What about attitude? Where, how, what....should be included? Better growth of an individual with special needs is possible in inclusive set up or special setup? Answer to these questions is really tough. It is really very difficult to understand that from where we should start. A lot of initiatives have been and are being taken to achieve the aim of inclusion. But sometimes it is felt that so many things are happening in so many different directions and somewhere we are losing the direction/focus. The various aspects to achieve inclusion must be looked at from holistic perspective. It should include everything like infrastructural facilities, learning facilities, facility to work independently and live independently, right attitude etc. The need to have a barrier free environment is very important. Barriers of all type like, physical, social, emotional attitudinal etc.

It is also argued at various platforms that. if we want an inclusive education system then why do we still need courses which are called as "special education" courses specially in the area of teacher education. There is a strong need to break all such barriers to make the society inclusive in real sense. The class room teacher is most important individual in the life of differently able child and a great support to family of the child especially the parents.

Inclusion is possible only when a teacher is sensitized and having a very positive attitude. She/he holds the power to mould the system to make the inclusion possible.

"An 'inclusive' education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive – in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities. The Conference proclaimed that: 'regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system' (p. ix). (UNESCO)

Here some very interesting and important first hand experiences are being discussed as contributed by the teacher interns as well as teachers who are doing internship/teaching in inclusive/special schools. They were told to write about their views on inclusion after gaining first hand experiences through observations as well as working with children with special needs. The following paragraphs will provide write-ups of teacher interns as well as practicing teachers. Permission was taken to publish their details (Name and designation). The excerpts have been only been edited for grammar and spellings so that authenticity of expression and thought can be maintained.

Shivangi Gupta, Teacher Intern

The school where I am doing internship supports students in different ways. During the initial phase I observed two classes, one has functional and another one was academic. I saw and they try to present information and content in different ways to support understanding of children with disability. They offer options and support to all so everyone can create, learn and share. The school building is completely accessible. They try to provide equal opportunity to everyone. The school promotes collaboration between parents and teachers. The philosophy of inclusion is being practiced, but more specialized teachers are required. The teachers should have sufficient time to plan things in a different way in spite of following traditional or old techniques.

Akanksha, Special Educator (teacher)

Inclusion in itself suggests "including". Inclusion means catering the needs of all the people who are under one roof. Inclusion in school is not a new process; it existed in the Indian education system since ages. Government policies nowadays also promote inclusion in the school. Some private schools have also accepted the concept of inclusion in their schools but not full inclusion rather partial.

I am also working in a school where partial inclusion can be seen. I see students with cases of learning disabilities more but very less of intellectual and physical disabilities. At my work place we have 2 special educators and 1 counsellor who deal with the children with disabilities as well as children with behavioural problems.

Students with behavioural problems have a majority or you can say very high number in the schools nowadays which is growing at an alarming rate. Inclusion of these students is also important and the need of the hour too because they are all struggling with their mind and feelings and constantly fighting conflicts with themselves, what to do and what not to do. Constant support, motivation, counselling helps these children to deal or resolve with their conflicts better. Also inclusion supports not only children with disabilities but also children from economically weaker sections too. Students are enrolled in school on the basis of the EWS quota and hence get good education.

So as far as I see inclusion, I not only see including or accepting the students with disabilities in the schools but also students with behavioural problems, students from economically weaker sections too. Inclusion should be accepted be it in partial form like admissions of students with academic struggles, intellectual disabilities (mild), learning disabilities or full inclusion which will include admitting students with moderate to severe disabilities level in regular classrooms.

Eva Meghna Minz, Teacher Intern

The school where I did internship gave me unique experience to understand the process of inclusion to some extent. Classes there were divided in 2 sections, which are Academic and Functional. Each intern got an opportunity to be placed in both Academic and Functional sections simultaneously.

Initially, I was placed in the academic section for the observation. In this section, I observed that the time table was fixed for the class. Some of the students needed Speech Therapy and they went for occupational therapy, according to their time table. Students were taught different subjects such as English, Maths and Environmental Studies (EVS) along with Art and crafts, Physical Education, Music as Co- Curricular activities.

Afterwards I was placed in Functional section. There were minimum academic subjects in these classes. The main focus was on functional activities, activities to improve motor skills, Activities of Daily living and other such activities. The children, who were not so good in the academic area but were good in other than academics, were put in Functional sections.

The division of sections as Academic and Functional was an effective way for the students as they were able to study and learn according to their interests and capabilities.

The best thing about the school is the inclusion of all the children in almost all different activities, whether it is Dance, Music, Clay Modelling, Physical Education or classes for Art and Crafts. I found that the Teachers were very supportive, caring and understanding towards each student; even if the students were from some other class. The academic lessons or classes for Art and crafts, dance, music or drama was modified according to the level of the students, which was highly effective and appreciable. There was a lot of aspect which helped me in developing a better picture of modifications and inclusion. It gave us numerous ideas, as to how we can create an inclusive environment in the class as well as in the school environment.

Nisha, Teacher Intern

Each intern got an opportunity to be placed in classes till upper primary. School is accessible in terms of physical infrastructure. It is equipped with all the facilities like sports, cultural, medical etc. Building is fully secure, of course everything with heavy cost. Fees structure is too high.

During my placement in grade III it was observed that curriculum revolves around the interest of the student. Students were taught different subjects such as English, Maths and Environmental Studies (EVS) along with Art and crafts, Sports, Music, Dance as Co- Curricular activities. Students may or may not participate in particular co-curricular activity, for e.g. if someone is not interested in dance, then he or she was allowed to go back to their respected classes

Moreover, what I observed, children who were not good in the academic area were allowed to participate in co-curricular activities and teachers always encouraged them and put their efforts to help the children to participate more in other activities like dance, music or arts other than academics. I found that the teachers were very supportive and caring and very much sensitized towards the needs of children with disability. This was a very good initiative made for the students as they were able to study and learn according to their interests and capabilities. School focuses not only on academics but holistic development of the child. This is how we can create an inclusive environment in the class as well as in the school environment. Nurturing Multiple Intelligences and honing life-skills of children, this approach for inclusion of all children is a way to enhance creativity in the children. I found this aspect to be very much successful in the life of children.

Ravneet Kaur, Teacher Intern

There was only one special educator in the school where I was placed. Therefore a lot of work load was on a single person, besides this there was a good exposure of observing children with learning disabilities but not very fruitful observations for other disabilities. Inclusion is being practiced in the school as all children study together in same classrooms. We can say it a partial inclusion (integration) as children with special needs come to the special educator whenever they are called by her in a separate room. The curriculum was also different for children who were already identified. Some children were not yet diagnosed but being assessed. The basic special education facilities like occupation therapy, speech therapy were missing and children were expected to adjust as per the institution and not vice versa. The school maintained very good discipline but was not very open about special education and tried to keep it confidential at every point of time that is why the children with special needs at upper primary classes were not good in maintaining social relationships with their peers. Also the number of children with special needs were really less, only two to three students with intellectual disability in whole school and one or two with mild hearing impairment. All the teachers in the school were not completely aware of the disabilities but knew that some children were different. The role of special educator was not very specific, and she was not really very free to teach as per her choice. Altogether the experience was good for observing children with learning disability but for other disabilities there was not much scope.

The training period at school was quite useful as it provided insight about actual inclusive practices going on at international school. Students are taught according to their individual needs and styles. Their needs are taken care of by professionals, educators and therapists. However there are some limitations also, for e.g. some of the regular classroom teachers were not seem to be interested to teach children with special needs. They used to send those children to special educators even for simple tasks that could have been done in classroom with other children with little alteration in their regular teaching aids. Most of the time students with special needs were in their remedial teaching room or in therapies.

There is strict code of conduct regarding checking of work and it was observed that sometimes to showcase their success, some of the teachers used to correct themselves the work done by students, instead of trying to put extra efforts to make children understand or to do themselves.

Some of the students are in school since long and therefore school is giving them coaching to participate in Para-Olympics. There is largely no issue of bullying of special needs children by normal students and all the students interact positively with each other. But in some of the classes' students with special needs were not found to be involved normally in classroom activities and ignored by their peers.

Remedial teaching rooms are also used for children without special needs if there was some problem in their academic area and also for those who migrated from different region and had language related issues. In this particular school some of the children were having personal shadow teachers who used to assist them all the time. Infrastructure was disability friendly and there were many opportunities for growth of all children. There is long way to reach but we have started journey towards inclusion.

Shivangi Tiwari

I was placed in one functional and one academic class. The first observation was in functional class and it was my first exposure with the children with Autism. At first sight I thought of it as an integration practice but then recalled that saying "Inclusive Schools change themselves for you and will adapt themselves as per the child's need". It was need of those children to learn functional and daily life skills. Their system was as per the child's unique needs and had qualified professionals who worked very hard with children. The next class was Academic Class; here I observed that students were given academic exposure to a larger extent. Students had extra classes for the subjects they are interested in. If any student had higher abilities to perform any task than rest of the class, they were given individual lessons and training by the professionals. Their focus solely was not on the curricular activities rather they believed in holistic development of child. Tours were arranged for children to learn things in an easy way.

There were several other things practiced in the school which were good to see:

- Parents and Teachers decide the goals for child and also the techniques. Parent Teacher Meetings take place regularly to track the progress of the child.
- Every class was made interactive with different activities and Teaching Learning Materials.
- Separate ADL Lab was there to help functional class students to learn those skills in school.

Inclusion practice is being implemented in a very unique way. Students are being allotted classrooms as per their unique needs and where they can learn best.

It is tried to prepare the child independent so that he/she can be included in the society smoothly. They treat students with empathy not with sympathy.

Shivani Sharma

Inclusion is often talked about in the current educational setup as the perfect solution towards a unified society, where each child is provided with equal opportunities based on their different needs. The term inclusion can be explained in one word, an "all-embracing societal ideology". Regarding individuals with disabilities and special education, inclusion secures opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms. The concept of inclusion not only is an ideal solution to include everyone in the society regardless of their differences but it is an excellent way to learn how to coexist and learn about our strengths and how to make it mutually beneficial.

In my practice school I found that the school works with the motto of "education for all and under one roof. So as students of Lady Irwin College, we the future special educators were given an opportunity to observe the inclusive setup and teaching practices in this school. We were highly obliged and grateful for this internship as it provided us with a fruitful and inexplicable experience. In an inclusive setup general education teachers and special education teachers work together to meet the needs of students. This type of classroom gives special education students the support they need and allows them to stay in the least restrictive environment. All students can benefit from the additional resources and supportive techniques used in an inclusion classroom.

Hence we can collectively concur that inclusion is the need of the hour not just for Children with Special Needs but for each and every child. At the first glimpse of the school's infrastructure the school appeared equipped with all the facilities to provide an all round experience to the students. The infrastructure provides excellent accessibility to the physically handicapped. The first thing we noticed in the school was the well equipped classrooms. The classrooms had big windows for natural light, wide doors and heavy curtains to avoid distraction in the middle of the lesson. In each classroom there is a reading corner which is carpeted; these corners act as a positive reinforce for anyone who completes his work early.

As for the inclusion setup, each classroom has two teachers, one regular teacher and a special educator to assist the students through a different method and strategy. Usually primary classes are provided all learning activities in the classroom itself and only have individual setups for occupational and speech therapy, but for higher standards there are remedial rooms for the special attention the students require. Each activity done by the students is properly planned by the special educators and is formatted in such a way that the student does not lose touch with the classroom lessons. So, each and every activity done by the student is in accordance with what is being taught in the classroom. Remedial rooms are designed especially for children with learning disabilities to put in that extra effort. In cases of autism the students are provided with individual special educators and sessions of occupational therapy and speech therapy help in moulding them. Mostly, students with behavioural needs are being benefitted by the consistent efforts of the occupational therapist. Some students who cannot perform well in academic activities are trained for sports in a recreational aspect. In addition to academics there is an emphasis on sports in the school. There are many different indoor and outdoor sporting activities that are conducted at the school and nobody is excluded from these activities. During our time there, the teachers were highly cooperating and even provided us with valuable information about the behaviour of the child and their handling mechanisms. The main strength of this institution is that it is changing the concept of conventional and traditional educational pattern in our society.

Tanvi

Inclusive education happens when children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same classes. Students are not just put under one roof but their individual differences are also addressed. This is theoretical aspect of inclusive education but practical aspect is very different from what we read in books and documents. Sometimes there are not enough resources, lack of trained teachers and barrier free environment which itself becomes a big barrier in the way of educating children. Other times it is observed that the setup which has all the facilities available for children with special needs, lacks acceptance on the part of parents to keep their child in the small group setting. When the child needs call for putting the child in a small group setting, it is difficult to make parents understand the fact that their child needs small group setting. Apart from this, there is always a push from parents at a very early stage to shift their child in the inclusive class as soon as possible when the child is not even ready to move to an inclusive class and when the child is ready to join an inclusive class, teachers are not sensitized and they have difficulty including that child in the class and to do justice to individual needs of the child. Even if they are sensitized, due to overload of work they are not able to pay full attention to the children.

Sukriti

Environment in my practice school was flexible, accessible and frequent communication between regular teacher, Special Educator, Occupational Therapist, Speech Therapist, Games Coach etc. The faculty is very much adaptable to the sudden schedule changes, affectionate towards students, determined for progress in children, diligent towards their work, flexible in their schedules, congruous with every child's needs.

Someone has rightly said; "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is Success". So, the secret behind this qualitative success to make the environment inclusive, is the team that never tires and works exuberantly and which I found in this school.

Here a variety of learning options are offered to children. Specific skills are targeted and learned by embedding them within the experiences of the day. Focus was mainly on their abilities rather than on their disability. A child with autism named in class 5th was being trained in different sports he loved to play. He was being recommended for interschool competitions and other state competitions by the school authority for table tennis, which reflects at the point of including him and focusing on the abilities. Regular students are being taught in such a manner that they have become very much sensitive towards the philosophy of inclusion. There was a child with ADHD who was very impulsive at a point of time during assembly and his meltdown was accepted effectively by the students of class 1. It reflects that students in this school are able to accept and include everyone very well.

There is ample of staff for making it a safe zone of inclusion. Special educator and regular teacher coordinate based on the lessons to be taught in the class. According to the child's ability, special educator accommodates and adapts the lessons. Special educator sits with the child in regular class where the lesson is taking place and explains in simplified terms accordingly. The coordination was very good which lead to inclusion. Regular meetings held every day to discuss every child's progress and solutions to the limitations were found to minimize them for better learning.

There are resource rooms which are being used when the inclusion seems impossible after all the efforts. Though the learning environment was great but Inclusion at a better level could be possible if some services such as Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy could be reached to the child instead of child coming to take such services. There were rooms assigned for students to take their occupational therapies and so on which is still a limitation for full inclusion. Work at school level, management level, and faculty level needs to be done with efforts in order to bring complete Inclusion at ground level.

Raziqa

I got an opportunity to do my internship in a very good school. The school had amazing infrastructure and other facilities. The major learning experience for me is that I experience inclusion in real sense in this school. I was able to relate theory to practice to a great extent. It was actually being implemented in the four walls. In a country like India, Inclusion is at initial stage. Ongoing process of shifting from integration to inclusion is taking place largely in our country, but I found that philosophy of inclusion is being practiced in this school.

Inclusion in terms of dictionary means the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure. The term **inclusion** captures, in one word, an all-embracing societal ideology.

Inclusion is based on the concept of Equity rather than equality.

Why Inclusion?

Inclusive education values diversity and the unique contributions each student brings to the classroom. Students with disabilities can be integrated socially with their peers. They can create long-lasting friendships that would not be otherwise possible, and these friendships can give them the skills to navigate social relationships later on in life. Their peers can act as role models for social skills through their interactions with each other. Students with disabilities can also benefit academically in an inclusive setting. Students without disabilities can also gain strong friendships that would have been impossible otherwise, as well as appreciation and acceptance for people who are different from them.

The experiences shared here clearly reflect the teachers' or teacher interns' understanding of inclusion, which they are developing as a result of their exposure to practice as well as what they are learning theoretically. For these teacher interns it is very important to provide them appropriate opportunities to understand, learn and imbibe best practices of inclusion and hence they are placed in good schools for internship. Therefore in all the reflections, all have expressed their satisfaction on the practices being followed in the schools.

After studying the extensive curriculum of B.Ed special education, as well as rigorous and very long internship they develop a very rational and practical approach towards educational inclusion

of the child. The new B.Ed special education curriculum requires them to be placed in all three different types of setting one by one; that is special, inclusive and cross disability. It helps in developing a better understanding of the various barriers in inclusion and the ways to overcome these barriers. But can we be thoroughly inclusive will always remain a question because a few experts still feel that special education is better for the children with special needs.

After the implementation of Right to Education Act all the schools are supposed to be inclusive schools but the reality is far behind. It is challenge for all of us to fulfil the aims of RTE Act 2009.

Reference:

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