

## REVIEWS

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# Inclusive Education for Students with Intellectual Disability

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper traces briefly the evolution of Inclusive Education for students with special education needs (SEN) and discusses some significant challenges in its implementation. While the aim of Inclusive Education is to include all children with SEN in mainstream schools, there are many challenges that have to be overcome for their education to be meaningful. This paper focuses primarily on the inclusion of students with intellectual disability, since they are likely to be the largest number with special education needs in 'inclusive' schools. It offers the outline of a curriculum that may be derived from the mainstream one in use, and suggests a model that emphasises the replacement of age / grade placement, as is the present practice, with experience and maturity underpinning learning in persons with intellectual disability. The proposed model needs, of course, to be field-tested.*

**Key words:** Placement, Accommodation, Inclusion, Curriculum, Assessment, Special education.

### INTRODUCTION

Until the 1990s, the terms "integration" and "mainstreaming" were used to refer to placement of students with special education needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. This was done at different levels, from full-time placement in a mainstream class (functional integration) to part-time resource room-aided instruction, and to self-contained classes (locational integration) attached to a mainstream school. With the emergence of integration or mainstreaming, students with moderate or severe learning difficulties (those with mild or moderate disabilities) were often placed

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in mainstream schools, as a result of which there was a decline in the number of students in special schools. While developed countries actively encouraged this concept, it proceeded at a considerably slower pace, if at all, in developing countries.

However some parents and professionals, along with their adult wards who had studied in special schools, were critical of mainstreaming as it functioned then. It was in 1988 that a small group at the Frontier College, Toronto, came up with the term 'inclusive education', which rejected exclusion and encouraged inclusive participation. Shortly thereafter, it became an international buzzword among educationists.

Thomas and Loxley (2007) were of the view that *'the essence of thinking of inclusion is in the acceptance of diversity and striving for equity for all members within a system'*. More specifically, the term inclusive education would refer to the placement of students with SEN in mainstream schools and to providing them with quality education within the educational process that caters to mainstream students (their peers without disability). However these aspirations were not widely fulfilled in the real world of classrooms, and in the lives of teachers and children (with or without disability).

Inclusive education appears to focus more on the **right** to mainstream education, than on the education of students with SEN. There is much debate as to whose rights are being focussed on here - the child, the parents or other pupils - and whether they are all compatible with each other's rights. Another concern was whether indeed, this **right** to be educated in a mainstream school really met the individual needs of those students with SEN. Simmons (1998) argued that in some cases the basic right to education, for a student with SEN, could only be met if the child was educated in a special school.

Thomas and Loxley (2007) pointed out that inclusive education, as it appears, is embedded in a range of contexts - political and social, as well as psychological and educational. They were in agreement with the conclusion arrived at by others (Fuller & Clark, 1994; Ainscow, 1999) who acknowledged the fact that schooling is so closely tied to local conditions and cultures that importation of practices from elsewhere is not easy. As a result, attempts to realise the goals of inclusive education have resulted in different educational arrangements and outcomes in different countries.

While promoting inclusive practices of education, pressure from governments and international organisations around the world has led to mass closure of special

schools in many countries. Some countries have converted their special schools into competency centres, wherein additional specialised-needs supports that cannot be provided in mainstream schools, are made available. However, some categories of students with SEN, i.e., those with severe or profound intellectual disability, continue to be educated in special schools.

### **Inclusive Education in Developing Countries**

In developing countries, the vast majority of young children face considerable hardship even to meet their basic needs. They have hardly any opportunity to improve their lot through education. The education system has many constraints, such as lack of infrastructural facilities, untrained manpower and inadequate resources, and requires the coordination of various services to meet the individual's special education needs. Recently, governments have begun to implement many educational provisions for students with SEN, backed by policies and international statements such as Universalisation of Primary Education, Salamanca Conference and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In 1994, the outcome of deliberations at the World Conference on special needs education in Salamanca brought about a sea-change in framing policy and in making educational provisions for persons with disabilities. The statement, declared and adopted by representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations, resolved:

We, the delegates of the World Conference on Special Needs Education... hereby reaffirm our commitment to Education for All, recognising the necessity and urgency of providing education to children, youth, and adults with SEN within the regular education system, and further hereby endorse the Framework for Action on SEN, that governments and organisations may be guided by the spirit of its provisions and recommendations.

(UNESCO, 1994: 8)

The range of problems faced is often so great that it is difficult to meet the individual needs of each student with SEN, in an inclusive school. For students with severe and profound disabilities, adapting to the mainstream school environment may further exacerbate their SEN and throw up, as a consequence, considerable difficulties in obtaining the education they require.

The effect of inclusion, on the educational achievements of students with SEN, is vastly under-researched. There is the view that though they may benefit socially from inclusion, their academic training would be compromised. A distinct possibility is that the need for high quality education may become unimportant while riding on the wheels of inclusive education.

It is quite possible that students with SEN, placed in a mainstream class, may still remain segregated within the class and among peers. With an alarmingly low teacher-student ratio in developing countries, it is feared that the needs of these individuals are unlikely to be met. Teachers too, in developing countries, have little or no training in a person-centred approach while working with students with SEN.

Planning programmes for inclusive education has to be done carefully. They should strike a balance in meeting the needs of both the mainstream students and those students with SEN.

Collaborative practices between mainstream teachers and special educators are essential so that the educational goals of students with SEN become meaningful for them. Discriminatory attitudes, scepticism and role diffusion often prevail among mainstream teachers.

The success of inclusive education depends greatly upon the availability and expertise of SEN staff, and their ability to coordinate and share responsibilities with the mainstream staff, when educating students with SEN.

Lack of concern, low awareness and prejudices of other parents with regard to accepting students with SEN in the same classroom as their mainstream children, is yet another impediment to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Determining whether students fit into the SEN category, duration of placement, provision for multi-disciplinary services and effecting the transition to long-term needs are crucial to charting their education. If concerns arise in this regard, remedial steps should be carried out expeditiously, supported by evidence-based data.

Whether class placement of students with SEN should be made grade appropriate or developmentally appropriate, needs to be determined by policy-makers guided by specialist and experienced educationists. This would of course entail taking decisions on the type of curriculum - mainstream, adapted or developmentally

appropriate - that should be followed. Individual education plans (IEPs) will have to be developed for students with SEN.

It will not be feasible to develop an alternative curriculum for every subject at all grades, for both the mainstream students and those with SEN, considering the fact that the educational needs and functioning levels of every individual with SEN may differ, and may not fall within the framework of the alternatives.

It is generally not possible for a teacher to instruct the mainstream group and at the same time fulfil teaching responsibilities towards the SEN students, such as monitoring progress, ensuring safety, facilitating peer interaction, providing help for personal needs and maintaining student records. Provision of teaching assistants to facilitate inclusive education appears imperative, but there may be economic constraints.

For inclusive education to succeed when children with and without SEN share the same platform, and to have them achieve educational goals best suited for them, the present system's structure and practices need to become more introspective, flexible and collaborative.

This paper focuses primarily on the challenges faced in mainstreaming students with intellectual disability and offers a model that, in the authors' opinion, can address the lacunae that at present exist in the delivery of inclusive education, and can contribute to ensuring meaningful inclusive education for students with intellectual disability.

## **A MODEL FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

The model proposed here is based on the premise that general education is intended to equip individuals to make sense of the physical, social and cultural world in the widest sense, and to enable future citizens to be effective agents of change when faced with challenges. The ideal curriculum should be framed accordingly. The demands of the mainstream curriculum will generally be beyond the scope of students with intellectual disability. A curriculum that will assist them to realise their potential and contribute to the world so as to lead fulfilling lives, needs to be offered.

While the concept of inclusive education is based on following the mainstream curriculum, this paper emphasises curricular objectives which the authors

believe will appropriately meet the needs of students with intellectual disability. It should be recognised that these students will not pursue higher education after their formal schooling years (say, eighth grade at the most).

The curricular aim recommended is,

*'To provide an education to equip students to live as independent a life as possible by them, in a community which may not always be fully cognisant of their needs.'*

The objectives to fulfil the desired aim should be:

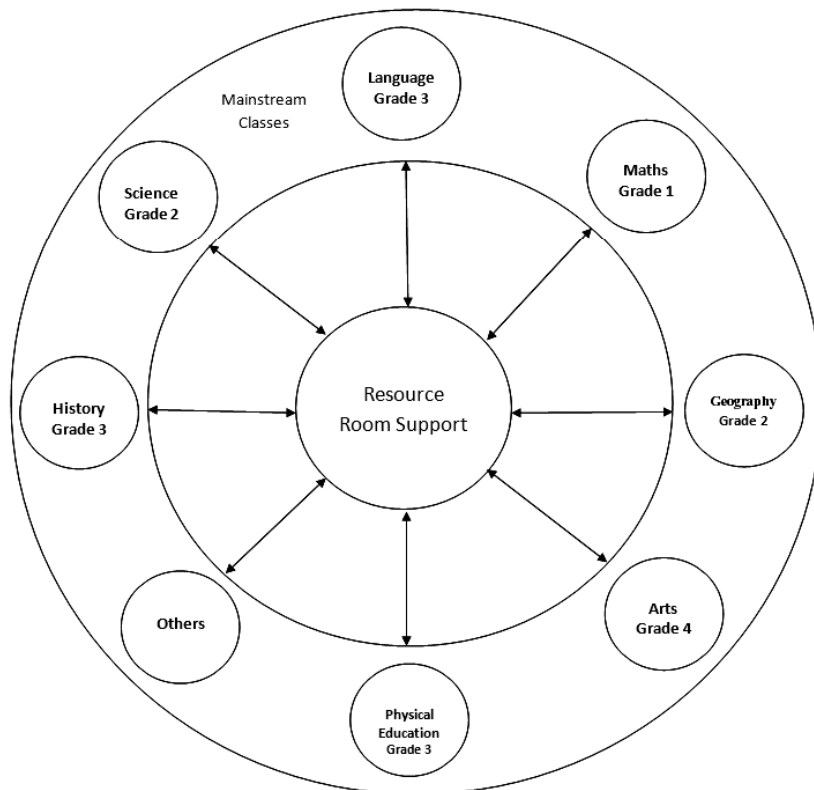
1. The realisation that sets and quantities are essential to spatial positioning (Maths).
2. The protection and care for the environment around them (Science).
3. The ability to communicate their needs (Language) and be aware that others also have needs to be met.
4. The awareness of being a part of the global family (History).
5. The recognition that everyone is different but that there is a place for everyone (Social Studies).
6. The ability to recognise that to be accepted by society one needs to contribute according to one's potential (Human and Commercial Geography).
7. The primary need for self-care (Hygiene and Biology).
8. The necessity to be selective in their faith in their fellow beings (Values).

The items in brackets denote the subject areas (from the mainstream curriculum) from which these objectives have been drawn.

Placement should be based on assessment of the students with intellectual disability. They should be tested on grade-level abilities in each subject and related areas of the curriculum. This assessment will help in drawing up their individual timetables and to establish their transit logistics. Placement will be irrespective of chronological age and age-appropriate criteria. Subject specific understanding should be taken into account and the IEPs should be developed on the basis of the student's concentration, perception, memory, logical thinking and developmental stage. In the United Kingdom, P (performance) scales are often used as curriculum-based assessment. For example, if the student is assessed as

below the National Curriculum level –1, such a student’s entry level will be that of a 5 to 6 year old typical child. In the absence of commercially available tests (such as the one just mentioned), the entry tests that are regularly used by mainstream schools to fill vacancies in various classes, may be used with such modifications as required by the curriculum outlined earlier.

Students should be provided with individual timetables. They should attend various regular (mainstream) classes according to their ability to learn at the ‘level’ at which subjects are taught. For example, the student will attend Maths Gr.1 / in class1; Language Gr.3 / in class 3; Social Studies Gr.2 / in class 2, etc. Students can be placed, if desired, in a lower grade/class (to build confidence through successful coping) and then gradually shifted up to an appropriate grade/class suited to their ability. They will return to the resource room after the session in the regular class, where the teacher in charge will monitor their progress and re-establish IEP goals as required. A typical scheduling for students with intellectual disability in inclusive classrooms is illustrated in Figure1.



**Fig 1: Typical Scheduling for the SEN Individual**

It should be noted that the model presented in Figure 1 does not constrain students with intellectual disability to age-appropriate classes. Removal of this constraint would enable students to draw upon the experience that comes with age and which is gained by exposure to varied environments. In planning such a curriculum for them, it is recommended that useful inputs may additionally be drawn from Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1983).

Transit logistics for inter-class movement should be incorporated in the timetable in such a way that class duration and the number of periods for each subject for the student with intellectual disability do not adversely affect mainstream students. The concerns raised by many educationists with respect to planning on the basis of readiness levels, should be kept in mind when drawing up IEPs. These should be made available to the mainstream teacher and will form the basis of resource room monitoring. As students with SEN generally have short attention spans, duration of the classroom sessions should be taken into account while planning lessons.

Grade placement of those 'included', will be on the basis of their ability to learn, **irrespective** of their chronological grade-equivalent age (The margin of +2 years of grade-equivalent age should not apply). This type of placement will take into account **experience and maturity** with perhaps some motivation (by meeting with success), so essential to the learning process. With the passage of time, the older student would have experienced a larger 'share' of life than a peer of grade-equivalent age. Kolb (1984) maintains that learning is a human adaptation process, whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience. Jarvis (1987) states that there is no meaning in given situations until we relate our experiences to it. Experience plays a major role in the learning process. The association of topic areas to be learnt with past experience will enhance retention and utilisation. This viewpoint is held by many workers in the field, including the authors.

While many persons may be uncomfortable with the idea of an older student being placed in proximity with a younger (grade appropriate) one, it should be emphasised that this attitude will change with familiarity. It should be remembered that not so very long ago attitudinal-prejudicial discomfort (caste and colour segregation) was overcome through time-linked familiarity.

Adequate literature is not available on social behaviour when mixed age group children study together. The implementation of such programmes would yield



observations that could assist in planning for compatibility. When older children with intellectual disability are introduced into class early in the scholastic lives of their younger mainstream peers, their acceptance as a part of the 'family' would occur more readily. Children are more familiar with mixed age group environments, as it is typical of their homes and the activities there, such as watching TV together, playing games and participating in household chores, etc.

By late adolescence, 16 to 18 year old students with mild intellectual disability (who comprise about 85% of the population of persons with intellectual disability) can be expected to develop academic skills of typical eleven year old children, at approximately sixth grade level. Persons with moderate intellectual disability (comprising about 6% of the population of persons with intellectual disability) may be expected to develop academic skills of six or seven year old children, at approximately the first or second grade level. Persons with severe intellectual disability will never attain an intellectual level greater than the average four or five year old children. Age-wise participation in selected co-curricular and extracurricular activities should be allowed for students with SEN along with mainstream children. It is recommended that students with cognitive disability be included up to grade eight, up to a **maximum** age of 18 years. After the age of 16 years, the curricular emphasis should shift to the acquisition of living and vocational skills.

A resource room with one supervising teacher should be made available. This is a 'resource equipped' room, where consolidation of the exposure that students receive in the mainstream classroom would be carried out and special segments of the IEPs are delivered. Living and vocational skills should be merged into the curriculum, especially for those who are over 16 years of age. It will be an advantage to have an additional instructor who has specialised in imparting living and vocational skills to students with intellectual disability in this age group. The resource room should be equipped with materials for vocational training and experience building, and have a documentation area where all essential records of the students are maintained. The school-leaving age should accordingly be raised to 20 years, to enable students to benefit from this part of the curriculum.

Classrooms in most schools have seating arrangements for students in rows (with table-chair sets to accommodate two or three). Providing a few individual tables and chairs at the rear of the class will greatly facilitate children with special needs to 'lateralise' their learning (when the mainstream teacher is attending to

the typical level students); while providing optimal facilities for the Resource teachers to interact with the 'included' children.

A typical arrangement for a classroom catering to both mainstream and SEN students is illustrated in Figure 2. The group termed 'above average' is to differentiate between the ones with cognitive levels above those of typical mainstream students. Special assignments may be given to them, while the mainstream teacher works with the typical group. The 'above average' students could also contribute through peer teaching of the SEN students who have been placed in proximity to them.

The proposed model is based on the assumption that in a mainstream school (with 35 students up to class 8) there would be 280 students (35 x 8). The number of students with intellectual disability in the moderate to mild range would be about 5 or 6 (computed at 2% of the mainstream student population).

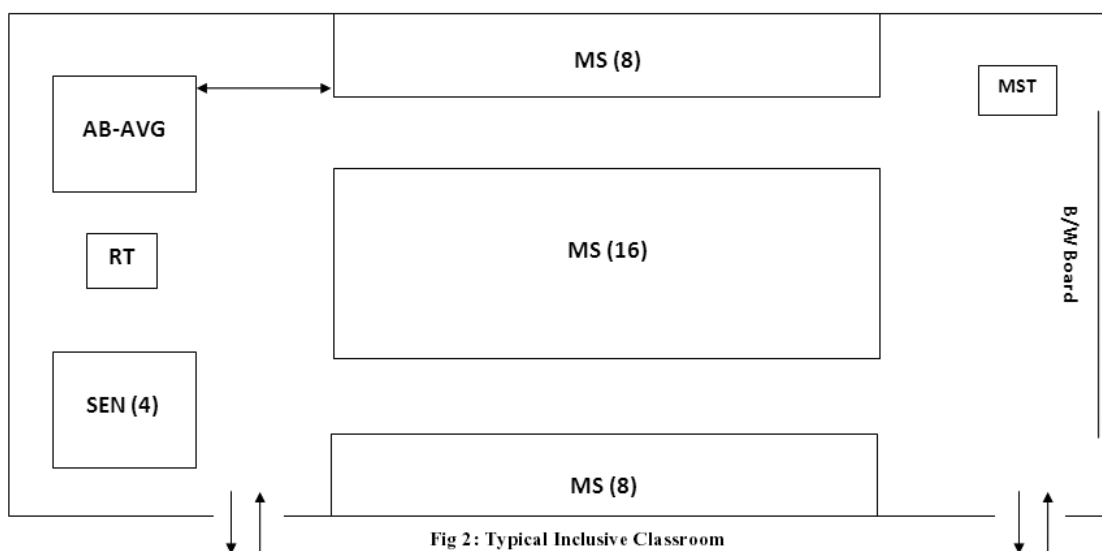


Fig 2: Typical Inclusive Classroom

MS - Mainstream Students; MST - Mainstream Teacher; AB-AVG - Students with Above Average Intelligence; SEN - Students with Special Education Needs; RT - Resource Teacher

Inclusive education for other forms of disability, such as learning disabilities, certain forms of cerebral palsy and autism spectrum disorders, would require special forms of educational inputs which would perhaps be best delivered by the resource teacher in special dedicated schools. Children with physical disability without cognitive impairment would need modified spatial environments and appropriate assistive devices. It is desirable that the mainstream teachers undergo

special training (or attend specially prepared short-term courses) in setting up and utilising such environments.

The model just described will not unduly 'overburden' the teacher in charge of the mainstream class (to the disadvantage of mainstream students), while simultaneously ensuring that the advantages of inclusive education are made available to students with intellectual disability.

Mainstream students should be sensitised to the needs of children with disability and made aware that all living beings are different and unique. Perhaps the most important change is required to be seen in the teacher who is a role model for the students.

Students with disability should be made aware of their potential and limitations, so that they aspire and at the same time are not frustrated by non-achievement. The knowledge of one's disabilities, truly releases one. This may appear a rather radical and somewhat controversial view at first, but the wisdom contained in the statement cannot be underestimated. Specialist guidance in this regard should be sought.

Counselling and joint parent sessions should be held by the school to enable social integration through neighbourhood participation. This should be an essential part of the school's extension work. Acceptance and assimilation in the community is of greater importance than acceptance within the narrow confines of the school.

The programmes should take into account that there will be those students with intellectual disability who are admitted into the mainstream class and find the syllabus daunting (not identified as disabled) and also those who are admitted into the programme after screening for disability (identified as disabled). IEPs should be prepared to meet the needs of both categories.

Many teaching and learning materials devised for children with intellectual disability have been found to be of immense value in mainstream classes and can be used beneficially by the mainstream teacher. Coordinated meetings between the mainstream and resource room teachers, and sharing of experiences, will result in better and more effective teaching, and the development of a wider range of teaching / learning materials.

Teaching through behaviour modification techniques should be restricted to those students in the resource room. However, both the mainstream and resource

room teachers should be aware that the theories of learning generally apply to all and that their approaches will always have much in common.

Resource room teachers should participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities of the school along with mainstream teachers, so that they may plan activities that promote greater inclusion.

Criteria for course completion should be on grade equivalents when the student with intellectual disability has reached a 'plateau of learning'. While mainstream students will move on to high and higher secondary school, those students with intellectual disability 'included' up to the end of middle school / eighth grade level will need to move on to the development of adult living and vocational skills.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of education has been long and tortuous, from the verbal transfer of cultural necessities to more specialised learning. It was only in the last two centuries that education, as we know it today, began to take shape. Learning theories were enunciated when psychologists began to make their contributions. Greater awareness resulted in stating educational aims for all persons. The education of persons with special education needs took on a greater impetus from the second decade of the last century and several methods have since been developed. Newer and more innovative methods are constantly evolving, which augurs well for the future. It is hoped that the model proposed in this paper can be field tested and thus add another fruitful dimension to the education of students with special education needs.

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