



Reaching Out... A Different Approach to Inclusion

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"If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn". To a large extent, it is these words of Ignacio Estrada that guides us in reaching out to students who experience difficulties in learning and therefore are unable to cope with the demands of mainstream education. Students, who fall scholastically behind their grade-level peers time and time again, are bound to feel inadequate about their capabilities, be low in self esteem and lack self confidence. A section for alternative studies, for 12 to 15 year-olds (Std. 7 to Std. 10) has been our answer at Vidya Niketan School, to assist students with academic difficulties – our way of reaching out and giving back to society. This initiative has been a part of our school since the last 12 years.

Understanding the needs of adolescents with academic difficulties, we focus on their all-round development, their socio-emotional learning and, spiritual and psychological well-being. No adolescent should be deprived of a school life just because he/she is unable to cope with the academic curriculum. As educators, we understand the depth of learning that takes place over and above the academic knowledge that students are expected to acquire, by just being in a school environment.

Our objective is to provide a school environment for students who would otherwise drop out of school or face repeated academic 'failures' being unable to cope with the demands of the mainstream academic curriculum. They pursue the open school curriculum while simultaneously attending school, and learn the required social skills of interacting with people of different age groups, learn the skills of negotiation, learn and understand societal nuances and societal expectations and become responsible citizens. This learning can only take

place, to a large extent, within a school environment which is all encompassing.

"That the child can achieve much more when he feels secure inside, when he is valued and loved and believes in himself and has a sense of pride", is a widely acknowledged fact. This is what we assist our children to achieve. Our school environment ensures that they are provided with a number of opportunities for social interaction, emotional growth, and personality development. We believe that each one of them is unique and has a special potential waiting to be tapped. They are encouraged to pursue extra-curricular activities that they take a liking to. We work towards empowering our students to become socially and emotionally strong and capable individuals.

Integration and inclusion takes place when the students get to interact with the mainstream students during the morning assembly, common games periods, sports day, annual day, graduation day, etc. But for the purpose of academics, they surely benefit from a small-sized classroom environment, to proceed at an individualized pace of learning, where they are coached and prepared for the open school exams. To be able to enjoy all the facilities of a school environment, be it the infrastructure, or the co-curricular activities, or the social life, and simultaneously work towards their goal of completing their secondary education, is our aim.

With the increased levels of awareness and acceptance amongst parents of children with academic difficulties, we have included a grade 7 class for 12-year-olds this academic session. We are always looking for newer approaches and solutions to practical problems that our children could face.

Knowing very well that team work that includes our students, their parents and the teachers/school is what will make it possible for our students to reach their potential, we involve our parents at every step of the child's growth and development during their school years with us.

How do our students grow in confidence and self-worth?

Once every term, our students are encouraged to face an audience of 1200 students and 100 teachers to present the school assembly. They are given opportunities to show case their talent before the whole school and participate in the Independence Day and Teachers Day celebrations, alongside their mainstream counterparts. Their sense of achievement and accomplishment after each performance instills in them a sense of pride in their capabilities which helps them grow in confidence at an emotional, social and psychological level. Academically, pursuing an open school curriculum

along with peers who also experience difficulties in learning, gives them a sense of having a level playing field to perform on.

Our school environment is their stepping stone to success, which assists them in completing their secondary education. The fact that 99% of our students get back into mainstream education after completing their Std. 10 through the open school is our satisfaction. Each step forward that each student takes after coming to us, which moves them forward in life fills us with joy and pride.

The system of inclusive education that we have in place differs from the true sense of the term or as practiced elsewhere, but has been rewarding for our students, parents, and teachers. While nurturing, supporting, guiding and coaching our students over the last many years, our experience and learning has been that this form of **inclusion can unlock their potential** too.

References:

- The Heart of A Teacher, Paula Fox.
- Inclusion Summit 2013, Poonam Natarajan, Chairperson, National Trust

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