

The Beginning of Inclusion – Classroom Seating Discipline

Nilam Shinde



When I first started to work with children with special needs, I was passionate and loved my subject area. As an Occupational Therapist, I had to observe the students in classroom and also while doing other co-curricular activities like sports, art and self-care, etc. Despite this, I was clueless when it came to classroom management with special needs children. I went into the classroom thinking that a well-planned lesson plan would take care of itself. But I found that it wasn't so!

In a given special school, you may ideally have heterogeneous group of six to eight children with special needs unless the school is into training and providing support to specific category of disability. Two students needing some help, two with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), three with physical limitations and one or two with autistic features. In such circumstances, anyone you can see may fall short without anything to support you.

I realised that's when classroom management is most important and desired. It is very important to know your subject but, you may not be able to teach all those wonderful things without classroom management. Fortunately, you will recognise that classroom order improves not only with those big strategies like curriculum, discipline and lesson plan etc., but also with lots of those little ones.

With the changing scenario in the education system, including the children with various needs in a general classroom is big concern to our teachers who have not had any experience with inclusion. Personally, I find the term 'inclusion' very fancy, derived from the western talks. It is not about mere placement of the special need children in the regular classroom. It is about the attitude and not the programme.

Let's have a look at some of the 'small' changes that made a big difference like the seating arrangement and see how it can have impact on the student's performance without adding any cost to it.

When we think of a traditional classroom, we

envision children sitting at their desks and a teacher at the front of the room teaching or explaining a concept of the lesson. We observe that the students who occupy first row are considered diligent. Moreover, they don't want to miss on the important things. Sometimes the teacher arranges the students to sit according to their height so that visibility is not obscured or may even prefer smaller group for academic concerns and to promote student cooperation

You may have even come across the latest and newer methods where you find the children are allowed to move in order to learn and explore. This is not an uncommon phenomenon for children with special needs too. You may wonder that I may advice you to do away with the desks and replace them with the tables or mats. I won't do that. The desks are equally good when a child has an issue in working in close proximity with others.

The seating arrangement in a classroom plays a central role, especially if you have a student who displays behavioural problems or someone with physical challenges/visual issues. Here, the situation demands some creative thinking. As a teacher you may have to go the extra mile with the students with special needs who take some time to process the things and their self-esteem is largely influenced by how the classroom is organised.

May be you are familiar with this method and are probably already doing some of it; row arrangement, circle, and semi-circle, free seating etc. Each style has its own pros and cons. The seating arrangement can play a huge role in the performance of the student. The teacher can wisely select the seating arrangement and its duration that suits the particular circumstances, classes and allows visibility to all the students. There is no one-size-fits-all since you are dealing with different needs and teaching objectives. The students get singled out by the announcing in the class that you are making such arrangements because there is a student with some impaired in the classroom. I would advice to treat it as a general classroom

policy, instead.

Some reasonable solutions to illustrate how you can modify the environment for a child with special needs is to enhance his / her participation in the activities and be a successful learner.

A child using a wheelchair may need an open row. Some child may need an adapted furniture in form of low height chair with secured desk and slanted board for writing support. In the same way, a structured programme for an autistic student is just as vital as a syllabus is for any course. You may not like to take a chance by placing a student with poor attention span to sit near a window or door which will provide enough scope for distraction.

Children with hearing difficulty mostly rely on lip reading. They should be encouraged to sit in the first three rows and try not to pace or turn your back to them while speaking. Be patient to repeat yourself sometimes. In the best arrangement, student and the teacher should have good light source to their side to facilitate the student's ability to lip read and understand you. Whereas, in the case of autistic children, adjustment in the intensity of light would benefit them greatly.

Secondly, provision of moveable chair, if possible would be convenient for children with hearing difficulty since, the distance from the speaker can significantly affect the level of comprehension. During any activity or school functions, if such students are using sign language interpreter, preferably avoid walking in the front of the interpreter while speaking which we often do unknowingly. You may have even noticed children with hearing difficulty using hearing aids. Hence, control of noise level is must. Few students speaking in the background or their whispering conversation can make it difficult for them to hear.

While working with children with visual difficulty,

be consistent with physical arrangement in the classroom and avoid frequent changes. They should be warned ahead of time for any change. The same applies for autistic children who dislike frequent changes.

These children continuously feel very anxious and may be even reluctant to express their feeling. Hence, by simply changing the layout of the classroom, in regard to the furniture, seating arrangement can help them not only to move around, but also participate willingly. There are situations when more than the furniture, a peer buddy or a teacher sitting beside the child during the activity can bring significant change.

In the inclusive system, the teachers have to address the need of students with various personalities and learning abilities. The children with special needs run a high risk of becoming drop-outs and suffer psychological trauma. I feel other than lesson planning, the most careful thought needs to go into creating some basic practices, such as understanding the routines of the child, adapting the seating arrangement to have better control over the class and also help these children achieve academic success. Thus, it is essential for the teachers to have knowledge about seating arrangement where children with wide range of behavioural, physical and intellectual characteristics are served in an inclusive setting.

The movement of "Education for All" and Right to Education Act is gaining recognition from all the spheres. This could be a way forward to bridge the gap in the inclusive education and prepare our teachers for educational practices for all the students. The more you plan beforehand on some of the basic educational practices, easier it would be to face the unplanned situations which it always does.

Nilam has professional experience of managing programmes/projects for adults and children with disabilities in India and Pacific region. She designs curriculum and prepares special educators to manage learners with special needs in special and inclusive settings. She crafts livelihood activities and develops adaptive strategies for optimal independent functioning of children and adults with disabilities in home, school and work environment. She may be contacted at nilshind@gmail.com