

# Promoting Inclusion in Early Childhood Education Through Effective Strategies

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We are faced with more change than ever before in education. Classrooms are becoming far more dynamic in nature due to multicultural diversity, student diversity, rapid societal and technological change, high expectations and aspirations of parents, new cognitive research on human learning etc. This would mean, 'more and more, diversity among students in public schools represents the norm rather than the exception.' (Gollnick and Chin, 2009).

Given the diversity of our country in terms of caste, class, creed, religion, gender, differences in spoken languages, fewer students fit the mould of the *typical* or the so-called *normal* student. This would mean that other than the children with special needs (identified as children with hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual disabilities, autism, health impairments, learning disabilities), schools are increasingly having children who would need special attention for reasons other than special needs. 'With all these diversities put together one can safely assume for about 20-30 percent of children to have some special need or requirement in a classroom.' (Barr and Parrett, 2001, Tom E C Smith, Edward A. Polloway, James R. Patton, Carol A. Dowdy).

What does this mean for a teacher in her classroom? Teachers need to be able to identify such students, understand their backgrounds, and accommodate them, including children with disabilities and decode what services to render, something easier said than done. Having said that, it is possible for many children with disabilities to receive a part of their education from regular subject teachers in general education classrooms, which means the teacher must provide the same experiences for students with special needs alongside the so-called, *normal* children, unless their needs cannot be met in the regular classroom either because of needs being very specific or the disability being severe. Teachers should have explored multiple options by using a variety of materials: visual aids, supplementary materials etc. before taking a decision on teaching the child with disabilities in a

different setting outside of the regular classroom.

In India, inclusive education is still developing and presently it is not easy to identify good practices. Despite its diversity, India is yet to progress in accepting cultural, religious, gender and other differences, let alone disabilities that exist. When it comes to schools, it is important that all the stakeholders – parents, teachers and children – develop an attitude of accepting children with different needs.

'Inclusiveness entails the teachers to develop the necessary skills required and learn ways of modifying the materials, be open to trying different methodologies, modify the content and evaluation to suit the requirements of children.' (Tom E C Smith, Edward A. Polloway, James R. Patton, Carol A. Dowdy).

Differentiated instruction is far from being a reality in our schools. One-size-fits-all is the approach that our education system believes in. We pray and hope for the best to happen.

Instead, can we ask ourselves as teachers, *Are we ready to embrace such diversity in our classrooms?*

## Being ready

What does it mean to be ready? How to prepare teachers to face such diversity?

Early intervention is similar to early childhood education: sensory processing and stimulation and exercises in cross-hemisphere transfer would take care of and help maintain the speed at which information gets exchanged, a crucial parameter for any action. Therefore, to qualify as a quality programme, some basic age-appropriate practices must be adopted. Early-years programmes have to be developmentally appropriate too. The programme must be interactive-active learning: the planning should meet the needs of children to the extent possible and it should focus on social development. Teachers must coordinate and cooperate with parents/family members. Such practices will benefit children all the way up to grade 2, perhaps even up to grade 5 and, depending on the case, even beyond primary school.

Many teachers practise activity-based learning in which children are given a lot of body movement exercises through games, action songs and rhymes. Activities can become meaningful and purposeful if teachers have set objectives along with some knowledge on handling Children with Special Needs (CWSN). They will then be able to plan and work in a focused manner to address different needs of children.

### Some thoughts on ways of going about it

If one is aware of the need for sensory stimulation, especially for children with autism and visual impairment, teachers can plan activities for *vestibular stimulation*. All of our senses work together to give us information about our bodies and our environment. But when something is not working 'right' (whether through vision or hearing loss or neurological disorders), the entire system can malfunction. This explains why children with vision impairment might want to sit and rock, often referred to as a *self-stimulation*. They may be trying to fill in some of that vestibular information their brain is missing out on.

The objectives for some of the activities have been mentioned below are based on the connections I made for myself during my school teaching days. Teachers need to figure out for themselves the association/connections between objectives and activities that could be enjoyed by all the children and meet their needs as well.

1. Vestibular input is incredibly powerful and can have amazing effects. Vestibular processing, arguably more than any other sensory system, is nearly always at work in everything we do and, when used correctly, vestibular activities have the ability to calm and soothe a child as well as improve many aspects of development, like coordination, handwriting, attention and even reading.

#### Examples

- For the rhyme *Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream*, let children hold each other's hands and move forward and backward as though they are rowing a boat – do it sitting, standing, fast, slow, or make children lie on their backs, ask them to fold and hold on to their knees and go rocking back and forth and side to side.
- Trampoline, spring board, Jumping Jack: Who wants to be a Jumping Jack today? (Be around

to prevent children from falling).

- Swinging from side to side: Let children hold hands and swing side to side to the rhyme *Rock-a-bye-baby*.
- Aeroplane: Make them stretch their hands out and go *wheeeee*. Ask them to feel the wind on their face.
- Gentle stretches for neck and back.

(Examples of the popular rhymes above can be replaced by other poems.)

2. Consider exercises related to movement. Teachers give children activities that involve a lot of moving around (kinesthetics) which is required for children. But can there be some activities that would improve the sense of balance? The way one can tell that an arm is raised above or behind even when eyes are closed is an example of proprioception, the ability to sense the orientation of one's body in relation to the environment. It is very important to the brain as it plays a big role in self-regulation, coordination, posture, body awareness, the ability to attend and focus, and speech. Try recalling instances or situations where you do not need to pay attention, on a daily or minute-to-minute basis, to steps while climbing, avoiding something on the path as you walk etc. One can get clumsy and uncoordinated when this sense of balance is dysfunctional.

### Some activities to promote balance

- Making children stand on one leg (guess many can do it).
- Do the same with eyes closed (this is something even adults can try). We feel we lack concentration and lose balance. Therefore, many suggest this to improve concentration too.
- Walking backwards with eyes closed/blindfolded.

### Developing cognitive ability, visual perception, auditory skills

On the board write colour names in different colours: red written in blue, blue written in yellow etc. Children should identify the *colour* and not the *word*.

Some may feel that these exercises may confuse children, but the point is not to assess them on reading, but to develop cross-hemisphere wiring, exercises for synchronisation – like using both hands to play the piano. The point is to provide children

with a variety of such stimulation. Going forward, the child will benefit greatly from developed visual perception as it will allow him or her to take notes and, generally, understand study material better.

An effective classroom game that children love and which will improve attention along with listening skills is *Simon says*. The teacher keeps giving instructions to children who, in turn, perform the required action. For example:

*Simon says, touch your nose*

*Simon says, touch your feet*

*Simon says, hold your thumb* and so on.

When the instruction is given without saying Simon says, children should not follow the instruction and not do the action. Children just love such games (I am sure there are variations of it).

### **Other activities**

- Practice making lines. Let children draw large circles in the sand. Use flour, air or finger paint before using a crayon.
- Put matching textures in two separate bags. Ask the children to select a texture from one bag and find the matching texture in the second bag.
- Make children do big steps, little steps, big jump, small jump, walk on a line, skip on one leg, walk on tiptoe, throw, catch, kick a ball, roll a tyre.

### **Activities to develop self-help skills**

Apart from the ones mentioned above, developing self-help skills one of the areas of major support we need to provide for CWSN, though this is equally important for other children as well. Teachers may give simple tasks for children to do, such as:

- Packing their own things
- Staying physically clean, using napkins or kerchiefs
- Knowing to use the bathroom when required
- Performing simple tasks as serving fruit, juice, etc to other children during recess.

The objective of such tasks is to help children become independent, learn to help others and recognise their own needs, thus, paving the way for independent living and self-help in the future.

Activities to improve attention, retain things learnt, eye-hand coordination

Here are a few activities that could help children with these difficulties. Some of these activities may

serve more than one purpose. (Just to reiterate, teachers should know the reasons for giving such activities to children and not just because ‘that is how it must be taught in younger classes or because this is the idea of activity-based learning’).

### *Improving attention*

- Threading a needle (plastic needles are available in sewing kits).
- Picking out straws, like the Jenga game. Drop all the straws vertically into a box and pick one without disturbing the others (whoever picks maximum number wins and feels happy).
- Raising hands only on hearing words beginning with a specific letter.
- The teacher shows colour cards continuously and children keep track of colours shown and tell how many they see of a specific colour, example, Red.

### *Improving eye-hand coordination, fine muscle development*

- Stitching – doing cross stitch on cloth or on chart paper.
- Sorting of beads, seeds, categorising them according to colour, size etc.
- Tracing along the dotted lines or over a picture.
- Cutting along dotted lines, folded lines or a picture.

### *Improving listening skills*

- Listen to the beat/rhythm of claps and repeat.
- Watch the ‘Karadi Tales’ series (a good source if still available). Currently, people use BookBox videos.
- Listen to a sound/voice and point to the direction it came from.
- Listen blindfolded to the sounds around (or sound produced) and identify them.

### *Enhancing memory*

- Ask children to arrange picture cards in a sequence that will tell a story.
- Recall story in their own words, but in the required sequence.
- Recall the names of classmates.
- Put a few items randomly in a tray ask children to look at them for a minute, then recall as many items as possible.



*Figure ground perception*

Children must find the smaller pictures in the larger picture, as in the one given above to help them focus on one specific piece of information in a busy background. Similarly, audio figure ground perception is to help a child pick a sound or voice from a noisy environment. Such exercises will help a child locate specific things from a larger setting. It is good practice for finding information from a book, blackboard, dictionary, track reading in a page/line etc.

The list of such activities is endless. What is important is to have an objective and not just a list. Teachers are no doubt driven by the syllabus/course that is to be completed, but what sets quality teaching apart is the strategy – how children are approached, the content delivered, learning kept flexible to suit children’s needs – all of which show their willingness to do that extra bit to bring all the children into the learning space.

### *Play*

Play is another area which provides lots of opportunities for a teacher to observe and

understand children. Play is children’s natural medium of communication. ‘For children to “play out” their experiences and feelings is the most natural, dynamic and self-healing process in which they can engage.’ When a child is playing, he/she is involved physically, mentally and emotionally. This is the reason that the play area should resemble real-life setting to the extent possible and not have to be directed all the time. It is important to provide them with a variety of materials or kits to help them to play out what they observe or learn from their surroundings – kitchen set, doctor set, carpentry, plumbing, teacher set, etc. ‘Play is to the child what verbalisation is to an adult’.

### **Help children embrace diversity**

The point to note is that all these activities are to be conducted for all the children in a class as inclusive practice since they work well for CWSN. Such practices will make children accept each other, embrace diversity and also make them sensitive towards each other.

Teachers should work in collaboration with the special educators wherever possible. In schools

where there are no such specialists, schools can:

- Make teaching-learning materials
- Design child-friendly curricula
- Plan teaching methodologies
- Modify assessments

Teachers should also be equipped with the skills of counselling, orienting parents and the community and sensitising children to accepting differences. Even after the general subject teacher gets trained, a strong support system is required to strengthen the approach or programme. Teachers also have to tune in to recognising, appreciating and acknowledging or even rewarding children for what they know and begin from where the child is, at what stage of learning the child is in.

‘Children’s learning is facilitated most effectively when teaching practices, curricula, and learning environments are strengths based rather than deficit focused and are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for each child’. If we look at this statement carefully, we can see how important it is to create developmentally appropriate situations for students of any age.

With a little more awareness now than before, schools and teachers are realising that all children have the right to inclusion and are, therefore, finding ways to include everyone in the activities that constitute daily life. The challenge, still, is to find activities or create spaces that are available to all children and not design any special activities for CWSN, especially in the early years.

‘Before children can understand a thing, they need to experience... experiment with real things.’

‘Help them get the materials they need and guide their work but do not tell them too much...’

‘Later in school, the children will have the theory and the explanations.’ (Introduction, *Preparation for Understanding*, UNICEF)

### **In brief**

Activities are to be planned for all the children in a class. Children need to be part of age-appropriate classrooms for learning, singing, dancing, music, games etc. While there has to be an objective for planning an activity, the aim should not be to assess children for their engagement in each of these. The idea is to provide children with plenty of opportunities and allow learning to happen. A keen observer will know if children are meeting the requirements or not, also, if every child’s need is met or not.

One needs to be aware of the most important skill or capacity that is to be developed in a child, especially for children with disabilities. For instance, if providing them with the social skills, self-help is the priority, please begin there and let academic learning happen through that. The aim of education should be to make children independent. Children can be main-streamed through various means and not only through academics or subject learning. It is only then that one can claim to have met the needs of every child. No reference to Individualised Education Programme (IEP) has been made because the point is to include everyone.

I am sure many modern versions of the games mentioned are available now. The materials mentioned are from what was used and from personal experience.

## References

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