



Making Pre-Schools Inclusive

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Inclusion is a buzz word. It has currency and a feel-good tone. But the method of operating inclusive education largely remains like the letter x in Algebra, the unknown factor!

I present here the case profile of a successful experiment, which demonstrates the possibility of inclusion across age groups and levels of ability.

The Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Child Study Centre and Nursery School was established in 1959 and has served as a living laboratory attached to the Dept. of Child Development at the Lady Irwin College in Delhi. The premises have shifted, but the principles have remained constant. Being an adjunct of a post-graduate section has several obvious advantages for the activities. Around 1980, we got the funds to build a beautiful centre for young children. The architects, Stein, Doshi and Bhalla (among the most admired in Delhi) agreed to construct the building after a discussion with us. We were fortunate to get a positively brilliant Stein original! There was an open grassed over courtyard, large rooms, outdoor play areas, a spacious lawn and a welcoming wicket gate.

Admission Policy:

a Mirror of our Changing Perspectives


In the early years, when the Nursery school was a small unit, all the children who applied were admitted. Over the years, as the numbers grew, informal meetings were held with the parents and the child, and quick assessments were made to ensure that the child would benefit from the school. Later, every child's admission was preceded by a few questions to the children and observation of their play with the materials provided. Gradually, before we knew it, these pre-admission meetings became testing sessions for children seeking admission, with children and parents having to respond to some questions. The invisible criteria fell into two main categories: the child's cognitive and social level of

functioning and the parents' involvement in their children's progress. At this time, the children who scored well and the parents who seemed most keen became the choice. Every little child could not be admitted, so some families had to go back disappointed.

At that time, I intervened and asked the Nursery School teachers at a Staff meeting, why we should admit only bright children with competent parents. With our level of expertise and commitment, should we not be able to educate all categories of children? There would be many who would thrive in a good pre-school, but without our kind of input, get nowhere. This was hotly debated, but we finally came to an agreement on the admission policy: that we would give first preference to siblings of the children in the school, children and grandchildren of teachers and College faculty. Since the school was attached to a post-graduate Department of Child Development and also served as a laboratory for the students, we decided to give priority to adopted children and to twins. The remaining spaces would be open.

Since we had decided that no testing would be done, we settled on a first-come-first-served policy for the seats. The queue outside the window for the application forms started forming at 5.00 am on the opening day for issue of forms. Those who could send a person to stand on their behalf got a natural "headstart". There were many peons, drivers and clerks in that line. Some parents had demonstrated both their resourcefulness and their access to economic resources!

In the process, something interesting had happened. The children came from a wide spectrum of abilities and talents. We found we had four or five children with disability (for instance, Down Syndrome, very poor vision, spasticity). We took them in, of course, and immediately created a



special section for them. One of our teachers, who had training, experience and wonderful warmth, took charge. The following year, we gave preference in admission to children with mild or moderate disability and took in five more children, to make it a class of ten.

Each of our sections had a river's name: Kaveri, Yamuna, Narmada and so on. The class of children who needed special attention was called "Sangam".

We still had one problem to face. We found that some of the children had to be picked up from their homes miles away and were sometimes sleepy during school hours. By the time they reached home, we felt, they would surely have been exhausted. It made sense to us that no child should spend more than 30 minutes in the school bus, each way. Or even if they were dropped off in the family car, there should be a moderate time they spent getting to school. So in the following year's admission policy, we decided to take newcomers from a radius of 5 kms. There was some protest from parents and we had to make a concession of a couple of kms. for one or two new admissions. We found out only later that many parents had chosen to give addresses of friends or family living within "the magic circle" just to get their children in. They were always one step ahead of us!

The Programmes: Sangam, The Enabling Centre and Day Care

SANGAM

From Sangam which had ten children from the ages of 3 to 7, one or two children would come to the main group for activities like music or clay work. This was done after all the children had got fully adjusted to the school and the routines. Sometimes the whole class of Sangam would come as spectators for a dance by the older children. At other times, they would just walk up to the vegetable garden nearby, with one of their teachers. Even though all of them may not have been learning to read and write, they became familiar with the setting and had a feeling of belonging. It was their school. In my view, this was real inclusion, as would happen in any family.

Word got round that we were giving preference for children with special needs, but ours was a fee-paying school. Sometimes a family from the lower middle class would come with their child. If we could take the child in, we would do so and ask one of the

affluent parents if they could support one more child. We rarely met with a refusal. There are many more details one can give, but I will stop here.

THE ENABLING CENTRE

We did a survey in a two kilometer radius to find out if children of the Primary school age with any kind of sensory or physical disability had dropped out of school or not been to school at all, because of not finding a suitable institution which would take them. To support this section, we applied for a grant under the HRD Ministry's "Innovative and Experimental Programmes in Elementary Education" and were fortunate to get funded for about eight years. We acquired a van with special seat belts in all the seats, so that each child could be picked up from home and dropped back to the doorstep. A variety of activities were planned. A popular one was puppetry by "Jan Madhyam" a voluntary group of talented singers and artistes. We also managed to get some funds from the UGC, under their scheme for Extension activities. The Enabling Centre was intended to demonstrate how to plan school activities for a mixed group of mild and moderate disabilities. We did have many visitors.

DAY CARE

We found that some mothers of our pre-school children had full time jobs and could not comfortably take their children back after 12 noon. We invited them to leave the children with us for the afternoon session, for an extra fee. We also permitted the older siblings of these children to join them after they had finished regular school. Sometimes even parents who did not have their little ones in our school would ask us to take in their older children into our Day Care. So the Day care centre had a mixed age group, as vertical grouping has come to be called. All the children would get a hot lunch. The young children would be put to sleep, the others would have arts and crafts, games and music, drama and puppetry. This section stayed open until 5.00 pm. This service was most popular with the parents, who found the children were in safe custody, had good company and were under professional caregivers. I feel that this is a model for many schools. Such a programme would become an invaluable asset to the community.

UPDATE on the Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Child Study Centre

- by Sudha Parthasarathi

In 2005, the Golden Jubilee year, SETU, the Systematic Early Training Unit was flagged off to provide early intervention to infants at risk of developing disability (birth onwards).

The various services provided by the Centre include the following:

Infant Care and Day Care Program
(6months-12 years)

Kilkari: The Toddlers' Club
(6 months-2 years)

Play Centre (2-3 years)

Nursery School (3-5 years)

SETU: Early intervention unit for infants at risk
(Birth-3 years)

Educational and remedial programs for children with special needs (3-12 years)

Speech and Occupational Therapy

Saathi: The Counselling Cell

Personal Development and Training for Youth with Special Needs/Disabilities

The Centre currently (2013-2014) has a strength of nearly 150 students divided between nine classes. The classes are all named after rivers: Shipra, Narmada, Kaveri, Saryu and Sangam - each class room is a river through which the water flows with no forcing or holding back- an ideology which underlines the Centre's approach to teaching and caring for children.

The Centre's inclusive program, "Sangam" denotes the confluence of all waters to form a single stream. Our programs too are a convergence of children with varying abilities and from varying backgrounds, learning and blossoming together. The Early Intervention Centre - SETU bridges the gap between home and schooling.

While two classrooms are dedicated exclusively to children with special needs, these classes are physically adjoining the regular classrooms. Both sections of the Nursery School are an inclusive set up. Prayer time, play time participation in extra curricular activities, festival celebration, excursions are attended jointly by all children. Thus the

environment facilitates learning through imitation and observation of peers as well as creates better sensitivities to each other. The individualized educational program takes care of those areas where added and special inputs are required.

Integration and Inclusion helps in building sensitivities among the community towards the requirements and rights of these children. It also makes the community aware of its duty in assisting such children to attain their full potential and become a productive member of the community. Here it is imperative to mention that not only the children, but the parents, cab drivers, college students and staff too are exposed to all children. To one recalls the comment of Mr.Prakash Singh, the father of Sara Singh an alumna of the Centre - "I have been personally impacted in developing positive attitudes to special needs children and their challenges. Sabiha Khan m/o Shohum Khan, another alumna recalls how she considered those with various physical and mental challenges as a group who can never do anything. While her son studied in the nursery section, her frequent visits to the Centre as well as interaction with the parents made her aware of the different needs of the special children and she developed positive attitudes towards them.

Under the SETU programme, at- risk children (birth onwards) are assessed by a team of experts and an appropriate programme is provided. The intervention could be in individual sessions, group sessions or inclusive sessions depending upon the readiness and requirement of the child. During sessions counselling empowers parents, care-givers, family members, peers and siblings to overcome the challenges faced while bringing up a child with special needs. The parents are encouraged to follow the programme provided at home as well so as to use their time with the child fruitfully.

As part of the vocational training program, training by our Special Educator is being imparted to young adults with special needs. Assistance in finding placement for such trained personnel is also being provided.

Inclusion of children from economically weaker sections of society who do not have access to quality services is being provided through a sponsorship

programme for children requiring financial assistance.

Parent workshops addressing issues related to children are also conducted in an inclusive manner with parents interacting with each other and sharing their experiences and challenges in providing care to children. Recently, on the occasion of the International Day for Persons with Disability

observed on 3rd Dec each year, Ms.Poonam Natarajan heading the National Trust addressed parents on the functioning and various schemes and programs of the Trust. The audience included sections of parents and there was a very proactive participation from all.



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