



Include Me!

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The academic session is coming to an end and the students are stressed out preparing for their Board Examinations. I am desperately trying to make the class alive and cheerful. My normal class consists of two students diagnosed with cerebral palsy, one visually impaired student, a non-verbal student with multiple disabilities; two intellectually challenged, two with learning disabilities and three others with normal intelligence, but dropped out of mainstream schools due to economic and other family problems. I am devising a method of enacting a grand finale to our spoken English and effective communication class by asking them to do a project based on their business studies curriculum and present it to the entire class. As I group them, immediately, J asks, "How can M participate madam? He can't talk." Even before I could think of a response, pat comes the reply from T, who is in a wheelchair, defending his non-verbal friend, "But M is very good at downloading information, images and putting in power point presentation. We can then explain the slides." Problem solved in a minute! M flashes his trademark smile, which seems to say, "Thank you for including me".

My volunteer and I wonder, Is this real inclusion? Is it so easy?

Inclusion appears to be a grand and elusive concept. The fact that a single accepted definition has yet to gain popularity reflects its complex and contested nature. Inclusive education looks at both the rights of students, and how education systems can be transformed to respond to diverse groups of learners. The historic Salamanca declaration says, "Ideally inclusive education is the process of addressing and responding to the diverse need of all learners by reducing barriers to and within the learning environment." Mrs. Rukmini

Krishnaswami, Director, Spastics Society of Karnataka (SSK) puts it beautifully every time she addresses the teachers and special educators on Inclusive education. She says and I quote, "Behind each classroom door, lies a world of diversity. When students with special needs are also members of a class, the range of diversity increases, their learning needs may be more serious or more compelling, possessing a great challenge to the teacher." In SSK, we are specifically looking for inclusion of out of school children either dropped out or pushed out in the 6-14 age group, infants with special needs and children from socio-economic disadvantaged groups like minorities, tribal and immigrant.



Spastics Society of Karnataka

Although we believe that all students should be participants in the general education process, no programme or placement meets the needs of all students. When we hear the term disability, many people think of physical problems. However, physical, visual and hearing impairments are the least common types of disabilities. Most frequent are learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, behavioural disorders and mental retardation. We believe that inclusion benefits students with and those without disabilities.

Inclusion in a classroom can help teach tolerance, patience and to value diversity thus preparing all students for adult life in an inclusive society.

This is the reason why Spastics Society of Karnataka stands tall like a banyan tree with multiple branches and roots firmly grounded. SSK provides diagnostic and rehabilitation services for children with neuromuscular and developmental disabilities with special focus on cerebral palsy, mental retardation, autism spectrum disorders, multiple disabilities and learning disabilities. SSK's focus is on independence and self-care, communication, life skills training; need based education and above all the confidence to face the world. Even though curriculum based education according to the child's ability and learning styles is taught with supplementary learning materials, enrichment activities like music, art and craft, clay modelling and sports are also provided.

An inclusive education programme catering to the needs of the children from economically disadvantaged groups who are drop outs from the main stream schools is continued thanks to the National Institute of open schooling (NIOS). Many who have passed the secondary and senior



The SSK team

secondary courses under the scheme have been able to pursue graduation in main stream colleges in Bangalore like Christ College, Jyothi Nivas college, Jain University and Good will women's college. The above mentioned colleges provided an opportunity to the multi-disciplinary team from SSK to address the staff and the students regarding the disabilities,

thus sensitising the younger generation and also empowering our special students to integrate into the community. One of our special students who is pursuing graduation in communication says, "On the very first day of college, I was really excited. I had entered a new world, a world where students from mainstream schools had gathered to do the course and I am one among them! I am proud to say that the confidence I got from SSK has helped me a lot to reach to this level". Over the years we have seen many brilliant students becoming Brand Ambassadors of disability awareness in our society. Yes, we are trying to maximize the potential of the children with special needs by working constantly, consciously and conscientiously towards '**Inclusiveness**' in all aspects of daily life.

All through the years, at SSK, we have realised that the key to the development of inclusive classroom practices and effective instruction lies in teachers' understandings of the differences. It largely depends on their skills in mediating the curriculum for individual pupils. However, research indicates that many teachers do not feel well prepared for inclusive classes and lack confidence in their own ability to teach children with special needs in inclusive settings. Many teachers are more willing to include children with mild disabilities than students with more severe disabilities because this is less disruptive to their overall goal of teaching the whole class.

The changes that take place as a school moves towards becoming more inclusive also involve overcoming some potential obstacles. These include existing attitudes and values, lack of understanding, lack of necessary skills, and limited resources. Teachers need systematic and intensive training and access to ongoing education. The class room also needs personnel resources like, extra staff to assist in the classroom, adequate curriculum resources and equipment to cater for those with disabilities.

Families know certain aspects of their children better than anyone else and have the greatest vested interest in seeing their children learn, so, the family should be continuously involved with the child's education programme throughout his or her

entire school career. There can be situations where the parents' and the child's wishes are not always compatible. For example, parents may prefer a mainstream class, while students for whom interaction with peers who understand their issues are important, so, may prefer segregated settings. The students may not wish to be the only ones in the school who have a particular condition or difficulty. Conflicts may arise as we attempt to balance these rights. It has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to **diversity**. It is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from difference.

Clear role relationships among professionals, effective use of support staff and meaningful Individual Education Plans (IEPs) procedures for evaluating effectiveness are the order of the day. Using assistive technology as a tool for curriculum access is a relatively recent and rapidly evolving approach to education. The continuous

advancements in technology will only help to expand its application in the inclusive classroom.

Lastly, the role of society cannot be undermined when talking about inclusive education. SSK works with communities, corporations and other non-profit organisations to engage with in both the dialogue and process of inclusion. By increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from the cultures, curricula and communities, restructuring the policies and practice in schools and outside so that they respond to the diversity of students in the locality will lead to recognising that inclusion in education is a critical aspect of inclusion in society.

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After having worked as a teacher in mainstream schools for over 20 years, **Vijaya Mahadevan** started teaching in Spastics Society of Karnataka from 2006 onwards. Here, she focuses on teaching students in the secondary and senior secondary classes with special focus on Open Schooling Education. She can be contacted at vijaya.mahadevan@gmail.com. For more information on SSK: <http://www.spasticssocietyofkarnataka.org/>