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Dr. Vasudha Prakash, Founder V-Excel, Demystifies Inclusive Education

National | 27 March 2020

Inclusion works! This fact can be corroborated as soon as you step into the iconic Hotel Savera of Chennai and walk up to the reception. Arun Bhatia (name changed) who had been diagnosed with intellectual challenges at the age of 5, who struggled through the early years of school, whose education was attained in a special school, who was on medication for seizures for several years, and who according to everyone around him had no conceivable career possibilities ahead of him, will be the one to politely enquire how he can assist you.

Walk into one of the well-known schools of Chennai and you will find the easy camaraderie between two 12-year old friends, one neurotypical and the other with cerebral palsy, as the former pushes the latter's wheelchair, chatting away all through quite naturally. A heart-warming and absolutely joyful sight to behold!



Inclusion is the natural organic state of life. Everyone, every life form is different and there is room for every creation in this world. And there is no such thing as equality - only equal opportunities. Why then is inclusion considered such a lofty concept? India of yore, rural India and the India which is still quite its free-flowing self, is inclusive by default. In large families, if there was a child lagging behind or quite different in his abilities, he would naturally be included, as best as his capabilities allowed, in everything that went on around

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him. There was no room for stigma or shame. He would have been looked after by the extended family. Schools had their own version of inclusion where the teacher would customize education for the child from whom there were minimum expectations.

Over-analysis and overthinking have become the bane of the modern world. The world of education, while it should ideally be reflecting life in its magnificence and preparing children for enhancing life's gifts, goes about creating a parallel universe where realities have to be rediscovered as problems to be dealt with. No wonder children with special needs have to constantly prove themselves worthy of even their basic rights in this lopsided world.

Fast forward to the present times, and one finds that the whole idea of inclusion has become a scientific concept and a favourite subject of educational research. The practice of it, however, has not quite kept abreast with the academic and scientific furore.

INCLUSION AND OTHER RELATED NOMENCLATURES

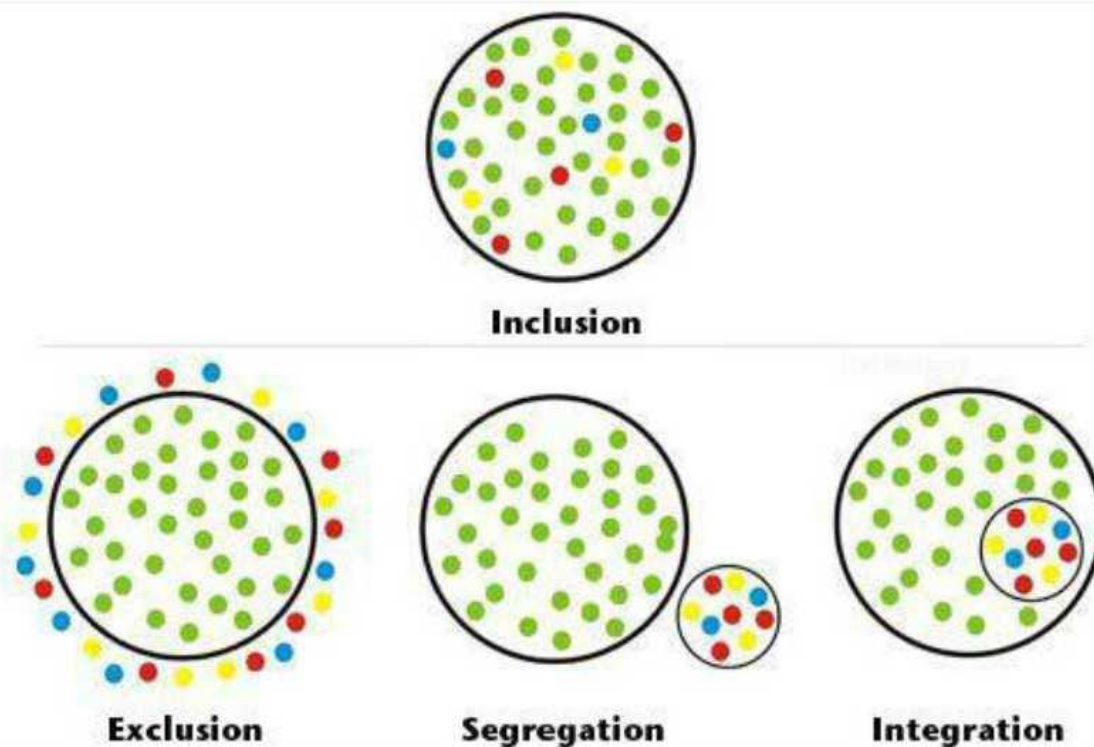
With modern education going about its business with blinkers, homogeneity in the classroom was all that management, teachers and parents could process and fathom. Any heterogeneity of the student population was being treated as a novelty which required strategies instead of good old common sense.

University professors and research scholars came up with various gradations of inclusion and a separate terminology of the degree of inclusion. Below is a list of the terms:

1. **Mainstreaming**: Mainstreaming, in the context of education, is the practice of placing students with special education services in a general education classroom during specific time periods based on their skills. To clarify, this means students who are a part of the special education classroom will join the regular education classroom at certain times which are fitting for the special education student. These students may attend art or physical education in regular education classrooms.
2. **Integration**: Integration refers to exceptional students being partially taught in a mainstream classroom. Activities are adapted so the student can "fit in" with his mainstream peers while learning skills that may be better practised in a room with more age-appropriate peers. Integration supports student outcomes that include: improved social skills, exposure to typical classroom structure and curriculum, eased the transition to a mainstream class placement and exposure to educational content that is appropriately curated for interest and skill level. *Integration* is placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream education without changing the system of education delivery. Many people mistakenly call this "inclusion" but unless the student receives the support needed, it is not.

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3. **Segregation:** Segregation occurs when students with disabilities are educated in separate environments (classes or schools) designed for students with impairments or with a particular impairment. It is most blatant when students with disabilities are forced to go to a school only for students with disabilities, but it also happens when students are educated in separate classes in a regular school. These are sometimes called resource classes.
4. **Exclusion:** Exclusion occurs when students are denied access to education. Exclusion happens when students with disabilities are not permitted to register to attend a school, or when they register but are told not to come to school or when there are conditions placed on their attendance. Sometimes, students are registered but told they will receive their education from a teacher who will visit them at home – so effectively they are still excluded from school.
5. **Inclusion:** Inclusion involves a transformation of the education system with changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, strategies, and review mechanisms in place.



INCLUSION IN INDIA

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The Indian education system is quite a complicated one with various boards enforcing their edicts on their subscribers. Each board has a different philosophy and practice as far children with disabilities are concerned. It does not help that the ministry governing education is different from the one administering disabilities. This misalignment in systems becomes a natural outcome of the ambiguity.

The other dissuading factor for inclusion of children with special needs is the difficulty level of the curriculum and the academic focus of the education system to the exclusion of anything organically developmental.

It is no wonder that the management, teachers and parents of regular children feel ill-equipped to admit children with varying abilities into the regular schooling system

So, the mindset is in complete contradiction with the laws of the land. Enactments such as the RTE, PwD, and the list of offerings for the disabled population do not find any resonance in the real practical world. Schools diplomatically turn away students with cognitive disabilities while colleges and workplaces have their own set of excuses.

However, there is still a silver lining in this. The country has seen a certain shift in the mindset of schools along with the teachers, thanks to the persistent and passionate efforts of professionals in the field of special education. There are wide recognition and intelligent acknowledgement of the fact that abilities and disabilities must be viewed in a spectrum paradigm. Every classroom will be a representation of the bell curve, with varying ranges of abilities and some severe cases. The philosophy of every school and every teacher should necessarily be to reach every student and leave no one behind.

Our organization, **V-Excel Educational Trust**, has been instrumental in facilitating inclusiveness in at least 100 schools in Tamil Nadu, through activity and practice-based workshops. We also keep a helpline open to the schools whose teachers trained with us, to support them through inclusion.



A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO INCLUSION

1. *Inclusion as a school Policy decision:* The management team and board should convene and create a policy on inclusion which will address the following points:
 1. Total number of students to be included – minimum and maximum
 2. Number in each class
 3. Additional resources – special educators, therapists, counsellors
 4. Training programs for teachers and staff in preparation of inclusion
2. *Administrative and infrastructure readiness:* Making sure that the building and classrooms have all the accommodations needed for educating PwDs in the building and to ensure that they have all the documentation, permissions, forms and formats.
3. *Parental communication:* it is very important that the policy decision about inclusion should be communicated very lucidly and firmly to parents of regular children straight from the horse's mouth. The message should be communicated clearly to the parents that this is not a negotiable decision. Workshops should be held for parents to enlighten them about the deep positive impact of inclusion on their neurotypical children. Values of empathy, helpfulness, humaneness are automatically imbibed in students when they interact with their differently-abled classmates.
4. *Preparing the regular students:* The starting date of the academic year should be a week earlier for neurotypical students than for their inclusive counterparts. This week should be

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used to orient the students in welcoming their differently-abled classmates. The teacher's activities should actually succeed in getting the students excited about inclusion, and making them feel privileged and special. Most of the activities should be aimed at activating a deeper value system of empathy, kindness and generosity of spirit. They should also be orienting students about how differences are a natural part of life and should not be shunned or feared. Examples of such activities are:

1. Welcome letters for the special child
 2. "Say Hello to someone who..."
 3. "Getting to know you" (Name-tag)
 4. "Picture this" – A gallery of ideas (bookmarks, wall, directories)
 5. People Packages – Nice vs. Ordinary
 6. "Ready, set, go!" – Preparation for inclusion
 7. Name through movements
 8. Walk your own shoes
 9. (descriptions can be found online)
5. *Preparing the students with special needs:* It is very important to prepare the inclusion student for this major transition no matter where he will be coming from. Children can handle anything if they are given a heads-up and are given proper directives and support. Children with special needs react strongly and with a great deal of stress and anxiety to new situations and unpredictable environmental conditions. They feel out of control of their lives and that creates negative associations. To provide appropriate counselling services, to help them become comfortable in their new environment would go a long way in sustaining inclusion. It would be a good idea to make several trips to the school before the school year commences so that the student becomes familiar and comfortable with the feel of the school. He can meet the non-teaching and custodial staff as well and start some interactions with the teachers. It might be a good idea to keep shorter timings during the first few weeks so that the routine and rhythm can be gradually set.
6. *Giving it time:* Inclusion can take even two years for it to become aligned to the regular school's program. But until the teachers and schools get a hang of it, the student may not get comfortable. Some schools may include co-teaching as a part of their inclusion methodology. In such cases, training the co-teachers, defining their roles and boundaries

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will have to be done with systematic precision. Otherwise, the confusion is bound to unsettle students.

7. *Supporting Special parents:* Parents of children with special needs are the most vulnerable of all the stakeholders. Their emotions range from guilt and hopelessness to hope and expectations. They may be extremely anxious and ask incessant questions about the well-being of their child. They also may have questions about the academic parity for their children and want the teachers to challenge them more. The teachers will have to develop deep empathy and patience towards the parents and act as counsellors as well. The parents can be referred for professional counselling too.
8. *Orienting all teachers:* All the teachers of the school, subject teachers and class teachers should be given the case files of the inclusion students so that there are no discrepancies or differences in the way the student is educated. There must be periodic reviews and workshops so that teachers' challenges can be addressed and they continue to remain motivated participants in the inclusion paradigm.
9. *Non-teaching staff of the school:* Interactions between students and teachers will be quite frequent with all the members of the school. Sensitivity and kindness must be instilled in all the staff members as a matter of living and working.
10. *Tone setting in the first week of school*
 1. Building anticipation
 2. Building awe and reverence
11. *Special education strategies benefit everyone:* There is a number of procedures and rules that have to be put in place in an inclusive classroom. A multimodal, multisensory method needs to be instated in as a part of the instructional process. A lot of consciousness must be brought into the pace of instruction, thoroughness and repetition of teaching. Attention to detail and clarity in communication is a must too. Movement, music, and cultural activities must become part of everyday activities. Sensory inputs and sensory integration activities must be interwoven into the program.



CURRICULAR ADAPTATION

An enormous amount of planning goes into working teaching work and the effort becomes even more imperative when there are children with special needs in the class. Adaptation of the curriculum is an integral part of the inclusive exercise. In an inclusive system, teachers should be trained to respond to different learning styles and present lessons in different ways so that all students can learn.

Curricular Adaptations are “changes permissible in educational environments which allow the student equal opportunity to obtain access, results, benefits, and levels of achievement.” Simply put, curricular adaptations allow students with disabilities to participate in inclusive environments by compensating for learners’ weaknesses.

There are two kinds of adaptations -

1. **Accommodations** are used when the student is expected to learn the same curricular content. But the student may be taught in a different way or need changes in the environment. Accommodations are changes in teaching methods. It can include changes in; where you teach, who teaches, how you teach, how the student can respond, materials you use.

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2. **Modifications** are used when the student is expected to learn less or different curricular content. This could require the modification of assignments, tests, worksheets and other materials in the classroom.

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE)

The concept of LRE must necessarily prevail over all other considerations for inclusion to be successful. The terms least restrictive environment, inclusion, and mainstreaming are often used interchangeably. They are not, however, synonymous concepts. Least restrictive environment refers to the idea that while students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with peers without disabilities, they still have the freedom to choose an educational setting that is least restrictive to them – whether in a special school or home-schooling. The LRE concept ensures that students with disabilities get access to a setting most comfortable and appropriate to them and one which ensures that they meet their potential in the most humane and positive manner.

(Dr Vasudha Prakash holds a doctorate in Special Education from Rutgers University, USA. She is the Founder-Trustee of V-Excel Educational Trust)

<http://www.v-excel.org/about-us/who-we-are.php>