Perspectives on Inclusive Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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"Inclusion is not a privilege we are going to give to the disabled, but it is the natural consequence of a humane society"

The educational rights of children with disabilities have first been recognized in the educational system of Iran 80 years ago, when formal education was provided for the blind children. Following it, ie, 10 years later, the same was done for the deaf children.

At first, these provisions were provided and supported by voluntary and nongovernmental groups and organizations. This was the case for the following years until 1968 when the government took legal steps in acknowledging the educational rights of the disabled children and to establish educational provisions for them officially.

The establishment of the educational system for the disabled children was based on an integrative model, since the disabled children were being educated in special classes within the mainstream schools. So it is obvious that the main aim of such a system was to provide an educational setting which could enhance the social integration of the disabled children and meanwhile was suited to their special needs.

Facing the population explosion which brought about a sudden rise in the number of students not only in ordinary classes but also in special classes, there remained no alternative but to establish special schools to accommodate the students with special needs in proper educational settings. But the establishment of special schools neither put and end to, nor was detrimental to the integrative programs. However, together with special education, the integrative programs were still being followed.

With the increase of these special schools, the Islamic Council proposed a legislation in 1992 according to which, the "Special Education Organization" affiliated to the Ministry of Education was established. This affiliation in itself was a proof to the continuation of the integration movement. Regarding this, various activities have been done to fulfill integration. Disabled groups whose integration in the mainstream schools have been successful are the blind, the deaf and the physically impaired. The official statistics of the year 2000-01 has estimated the number of integrated children in mainstream schools to be about 3494 pupils, which is 4.9 percent of the whole population of the pupils in special schools. If one considers the number of disabled children who are mainstreamed in different provinces of the country, but have not been registered officially, the number of integrated students will surely rise considerably.

With the program of integration in mind and resisting segregation of children with hearing impairment from mainstream schools, steps were taken in 1983 towards early intervention which was based on two principles: early identification of and training for pre-school children; counseling and training for their parents. The ultimate goal of such programs was to facilitate the integration of hearing impaired children in mainstream schools. Due to the evidences, these programs have been successful in fulfilling their commitments.

The successful experience of early intervention programs for the hearing-impaired children was then implemented in 1999 for the visualiy-impaired and the mentally retarded children. According to this programs, as soon as visual or mental impairment is being identified, the special pre-school centers respectively for each group, are there for the provision of training and counseling services for the parents and rehabilitation and training for the children.

Having the experience of early intervention during the pre-school years is a key factor for the facilitation of the education of the disabled children in the mainstream schools. So, this program of early intervention for the aforementioned groups of children with impairments is considered as a major step in paving the way towards reaching inclusive education in this country.

The last but not the least of the practices for extending the integration policy in the educational system of the Islamic Republic of Iran was a circular sent to schools in 2000, according to which some provisions and facilities have been made in order to pave the way for the integration of children with cognitive limitations, once called the "borderline mentally retarded", into the mainstream schools and to move against their segregation. This group of children were formerly being educated in special classes in mainstream schools, but now they will be served in regular classes in these schools.

Meanwhile; the Special Education Organization is going to do an experimental project on the implementation of inclusive education with the collaboration of the Welfare Organization under the program of CBR, in the rural areas of two provinces, ie Isfahan and Gilan - both of them rich in cultural and natural heritage - in the coming year 2001-2002.

A final note of importance which should be mentioned in any issue discussing inclusive education in Iran is that the move towards inclusive education so far has been hampered by the limitations inherent in the regular educational system, which are in need of reformatory changes if the move is to be facilitated and accelerated.

Anyhow, the key to successful implementation of inclusive education in any community is considering the local features of that community from the structural and cultural point of view, to be of prime importance.

**Reference:**  
**Title:** Perspectives on Inclusive Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran  
**Author:** Joibari, A A K  
**Date:** 2003