From Seclusion, Towards Inclusion - The Enabling Centre Experience

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This paper describes the process of change from secluded to an inclusive program at the Enabling Centre, New Delhi, India, and analyses the role that it adopted to bring this change.

# Background

The Enabling Centre is a small program for children with special needs. It is a project of the Department of Child Development, Lady Irwin College, New Delhi and is funded by the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. It started in 1988.

Between 1988 and 1996, the Centre strengthened itself as an experimental programme of education for children with special needs-in approach, methodology and system. Over this period it refined its understanding of integration and adopted methods within its own programme to facilitate integration. The concept of inclusion was first introduced in 1994 at the World Congress in Mental Retardation at New Delhi. The difference in the inclusive approach to that at the Centre seemed distinct. The Centre, through its Special Education Programme was preparing the students with special needs for integration - enabling them to adapt to mainstreamed system. Inclusion demanded the system to adapt to the needs of all.

In 1996, the Centre started Inclusive Education Programme as a project- a new and a separate experiment for three years. The Special Education Programme continued to function in the morning, while the Inclusive Education Programme was run in the afternoon. Within the first year many assumptions about 'including' were broken. The second year, 1997, focussed at devising methods of doing inclusion. Towards the end of the second year the inclusion experiment was adopted for the whole Centre, with the special education and the inclusive education programmes merging. The third year, 1998, reflected improved abilities at adopting inclusive approach and an increased confidence in doing it.

Following is a brief description of change in integration nee inclusion at the Centre.

# Integration as a focus - In a Special Setup

Integration has been one of the prime foci of the Enabling Centre for its special children. Between 1988 and 1997, the Centre worked at integration from a special setup. There was integration across disabilities- the Centre had 30 students, (5-13 years), with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, auditory and visual impairment, orthopedic disability and learning problems.

The Centre worked at providing a learning environment that attempted to enable the students to achieve their potential and develop physical, social and learning skills that would facilitate their integration with the non disabled. The attempt was to expose them to the demands of the non- disabled peers so that during the process of adjustment they learnt skills and behaviors that would facilitate their integration. The Centre worked at creating opportunities within its own programme, and outside by liaising with other institution for encouraging contact of the students with disabilities with the non-disabled peers.

* Joint activities like puppet shows, craft workshops, festival celebrations and some academic classes with another integrated experimental nursery school in the same Department of Child Development at Lady Irwin College.
* Workshops for siblings and parents of students at the Centre as support activities for promoting their acceptance in the community.
* Participation in events, such as competitions, celebrations organized by other institutions as opportunities for students to learn and cope in unfamiliar situations.

Even though such exposures were being provided to the children, opportunities of contact with the non-disabled children were limited and depended on situational factors outside the Centre like the time scheduled out by the other organisation, transport arrangements etc. Thus these attempts could not be incorporated into the system on a daily basis. Also such contacts were primarily in non-academic situations whereas what the Centre eventually hoped for its students was total integration including that in academic situations.

Did it mean that inputs/energy was required to influence the environment outside its programme, while the Centre focussed more at 'controlling' the environment inside its programme?

# Initiating an Inclusive Program- a new approach

In 1996, the Centre initiated a new programme 'Inclusive Education Unit' with the support of Misereor, a German funding organisation. The aim was to develop an understanding of the processes involved in the inclusion of children with special needs in a regular primary classroom. This programme was started with a new set of 20 children (4 with disability and 16 without disability) from a nearby slum. Gradually, this group of students was integrated with the previous group of students with special needs. This process evolved over a period of time.

Till January 1997, there were two programmes at the Centre that functioned in their own capacities, focussing on integration nee inclusion of their respective students with disability. The Special Education Programme focussed on skill building of its students with special needs - 'to prepare them for habilitation' by using student friendly approaches to education. The Inclusive Education Programmes also 'worked at habilitation' of the students with special needs, but in a different setup that had both students with special needs and non-handicapped students in the same classroom, in the ratio of 1:4. Towards the end of 1997 the two programmes merged together as one.

While initiating Inclusive Education Program in 1996, the Centre started with the following:

* Seven years experience in special education.
* Conviction that it wanted to do inclusive education.
* 'Others' saying it can happen.
* The belief that it will have positive outcomes.

The logistics needed to be worked out in identifying and admitting students in addition to developing a conceptual understanding of the program and its implementation.

The non-disabled (a term thoughtfully 'coined' to avoid the use of the word 'normal') students were from a local slum. The focus was on reaching out to the poor, but it was also understood that the Centre being an experimental program would not be attractive for that non-handicapped population who had access to other options! The students with special needs nee disability were from all income groups because for them options in Delhi were limited. Both disabled and non-disabled students were to be admitted in the same class and the focus was on understanding the process of doing inclusion while running the programme.

While conceptualizing the inclusive program, the Centre planned for time schedule, curriculum, assessment and methods of curriculum transaction. This was planned along with the new team employed to run the unit. The team comprised of a Deputy Coordinator, a post-graduate in Social Work with 2 years of experience in working with students with special needs; one teacher, a post graduate in Child development; and an assistant teacher, a diploma holder in Special Education.

One assumption about doing Inclusive Education was the need to develop methodologies for teaching disabled along with non-disabled. With previous six years of work with disabled, the Centre did not think it would be difficult. However within the next six months onwards it learnt certain lessons otherwise and these are discussed later in the paper.

The experiences of doing inclusion led to certain changes in practice at the Centre.

# Change in Practice while doing Inclusion

For one year after the initiation of the Inclusive Education Programme in 1996, it operated in the same building but during a time slot different from the Special Education Programme that had been running since 1988. The students of the two programmes only recognized each other's faces. They did not even know each other's names!

During the second year, from January '97 onwards, activities like art and craft work, celebration of special events like the festivals, annual day of the Centre and outings were jointly conducted for the two groups of children. The Centre now had 40 students with and without disability in the ratio of approximately 1:1 getting together for joint activities. They started remembering names and learnt to be with each other. However, a kind of grouping was also observed- students from the each of the above two programmes stayed together and showed less tolerance towards the students of other programme. They became more protective of their own group peers and often 'fought' with the other group or complained to their teachers about the 'wrong actions' of others. The non-disabled from the Inclusive Programme saw the 'disabled students' from the Special Education Programme as strange. Interestingly their interaction with the 4 disabled students from their own unit was very natural. It was evident that the issue was not acceptance of the disabled by the non-disabled but the acceptance of each other by two groups of students.

In September '97, preparation for a play to be presented at a drama competition afforded the possibility of a month long intensive social interaction between the two groups of children on a daily basis. Relationships formed across the two groups. Teachers had an important role to play. They grouped students from both the programmes, so that they were together doing a scene and spent more time with each other. They intervened positively whenever 'fights' erupted between children eg by helping children objectively report the incident and actions of self and other, by giving 'equal punishment' to all students involved! The teachers consciously explained the condition of the disabled to non-disabled, and presented positive role models by themselves effectively dealing with the 'problems' encountered because of student behaviours. The non-disabled started asking questions about why a child 'looked, behaved' differently. They also adopted the same strategies used by the teachers in 'dealing with their disabled peers'. It was clear that being together helped in accepting each other, however having positive role models (teachers, support staff) was extremely important in developing appropriate attitudes.

An increase in the pace of learning of the special children was seen. They were more interested in classroom, showed greater independence and reflected greater capacities to follow classroom activities. Was it because they had more 'able' role models to follow or because they had more opportunities to show their capacities? The teachers felt satisfied as they had during this period come to know more about each child and also about their co-teachers. The playful and creative environment during the theatre practice helped in revealing new aspects about students and teachers.

The teachers of the two units spend time together, working on a common goal and with all students for a sustained period. They enjoyed the time together. The experience was further rewarded by the successful completion of the play- 'Hakunamatata' that was put up as non-competitive entry in the Theatre competition organized for special schools. It was non-competitive because it was an inclusive production!

These were some of the positive experiences that strengthened Centre's belief in inclusion. Along with the decision to try inclusive approach, it was important for everybody in the programme experience it positively. The belief was there, but the conviction and confidence about own capacities came slowly!

In October '97, the teams of both the units decided to extend the combined work to all kinds of activities including academic. The Centre now had students diagnosed with mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, hearing impairment, partial visual impairment, and students who had no diagnosed disability, were school drop outs, who had never been to school and were first generation learners - learning together. Since the task was challenging, it was decided to give integration of the two units a trial period of three months, till Dec '97. The trial period decreased the stress of change, as the avenue was available to revert to old practice. At the same time the excitement was there to put in the best efforts to make it work. On receiving further positive indicators, it was decided to continue integration for the next three months as well, till March '98. It continued thereafter into end of 1998, the third year, and continued to be so in 1999.

There were several issues of concern that required sustained focus in making inclusion happen.

# Questions emerging during the process of implementation

## Concerning pupils

It was realised that the task before the team was of bringing together for social and academic purposes, children of not just different ages and mental abilities, but differing socio-economic and experiential backgrounds and different levels of familial involvement in the education of the child.

The issue of acceptance of disabled by the non-disabled was not of much concern. All children enjoyed their time at school and learnt to be with each other. It was only certain behaviours of peers that bothered them like hitting or making noise. These were behaviours present in both disabled and non-disabled. The children showed the capacity to understand that a boy with Autism made noise as this a way of communicating distress. They disliked the drooling of another boy with Cerebral Palsy, but also learnt to remind him to wipe it off just like the teachers did. They were surprised to notice that some students with disability were better, as compared to them, in reading and writing. They even sought for help during academic work- were all these reflection of change in attitudes? Did the question of disabled accepting the non-disabled also arise?

There were several issues that needed to be addressed.

* What difficulties did students with disability face while being with non-disabled peers? It was important to remain sensitized to these in the changed set up where the teachers might focus on their own needs of developing better teaching strategies.
* Experience had shown the learning in the same class with non-disabled peers does have a positive effect on the 'performance' of children with special needs. However one also needed to ascertain whether or not it had the same effect on children without disability.
* In the absence of a formal curriculum, the task before the teachers was of deciding on the content of teaching. It was evident that the content of teaching would have to be such as would cater to the educational needs of all the children and not unduly affect any child in terms of his/her learning potential. So how would the curriculum be evolved and adapted to meet the needs of the newly formed diverse group?
* How to teach? New approaches, strategies would have to be worked out to ensure effective teaching - learning. Teaching plans were made on a weekly basis. It led to a lack of clarity about the end goals to be achieved and a sense of lack of direction in teaching. The needs of students with and without disability were different. Former responded more to activity-based approach and latter demanded more of paper pencil task- how could a balance be maintained inside the classroom?
* Would the ratio of the non-disabled to disabled children in a class affect the teaching-learning process?
* How would the individualized goals made for students with disability be integrated into the broader areas of learning specified for the larger group to which the students belonged? The individualized educational plans of certain students with disability needed special attention, time and efforts of the teachers - how could this be managed and sustained by them along with the demands of the whole class?
* How could the involvement of all families be sought to support their children's education and to assist in reviewing of inclusion efforts? It had been comparatively easier to maintain contact with families of students with disabilities rather those of non-disabled students.

## Concerning staff

With both the groups of children coming together it was evident that the teachers of the two programmes would also come together. Their roles and responsibilities as special educators/teachers would need change.

In the Special Education Programme, while previously each special educator was primarily responsible for work with 6 children, she would now have to be a teacher of a new group of at least 20 children, with and without disability. She would need to learn to plan for more students, strengthen her skills at organising class and material and widen her understanding about families of students.

In the Inclusive Education Programme, while previously teachers largely planned for non disabled children (ratio of the disabled to non disabled children being 1:4), they now needed to plan more consciously for children with disability as the ratio had now changed to 1:1. They needed to learn more about different conditions of the disabled students, know more about their families and learn to communicate with them more regularly.

Hence questions arising were:

* What demands would new roles put on staff? The staff had become used to a way of working that now was to change. The staff needed to be aware of the demands- on their thinking and working styles.
* How would the teachers be grouped? Students of the two programmes were mixed and then put into two groups according to their learning needs. The teachers from the two programmes were paired so that each group had one teacher from both the units so that both could be complementary to each other. The interests and skills of the teacher were also considered eg teacher better at working with younger children, was placed with them.
* What supports would be needed to facilitate the teachers to fulfill their new roles? Training programmes for strengthening understanding of different disabilities, developing skills of working with families and community, and learning about teamwork were organized. The staff also required an environment to communicate openly, receive appropriate feedback and gain confidence on their own capacities and approaches.
* The learning pace of children with disability was slow. They required repetitive teaching and practice. However this was not required for the non-disabled students. How would the teacher balance both needs?

## Concerning space

The Enabling Centre has a small physical structure, two classrooms one leading to the other. This space was initially meant for only 20-30 children. With inclusion there was an increase in the number of students and students in the complex, at the same time. The limitations of space led to emergence of certain issues and questions.

* Would this increase in the number of persons lead to more disturbance and hence increased distractibility?
* How could the material be reorganized to maximize the effective use of space?
* How should the students seating arrangements be modified to facilitate their attention in class and reduce the distractibility?
* How should the day's activities be scheduled in view of new considerations of space?

While these were some of the issues of immediate concern while initiating the inclusion, it was also realised that many others may arise as the programme evolved. The team identified certain strategies concerning its implementation and monitoring, to facilitate changes at the Centre.

# Management strategies adopted to facilitate inclusion

Strategies were devised for dealing with the various aspects related to pupils, staff and space. These were devised considering the Centre as a whole. The onus for adopting the Inclusive Approach was not on the teachers alone, but on everybody in the Centre.

1. **Time frame** - The intended 3 months trial period of trying out academic integration was broken down into shorter periods to facilitate critical evaluation. This also relieved the pressure of adopting change suddenly.
2. **Collective Planning for all the Children** - Since the planning for both academic and non academic work now required taking into account the needs of the much more diverse group, the teachers of the two Units discussed, shared ideas, pooled resources and planned together as a group. It took more time and was a difficult process. Everybody was to be involved and disagreements needing sorting were many. However, it helped in strengthening planning, implementation and coordination within the team.
3. **Keeping the communication channel open** - For effective implementation of inclusion, it was decided to keep open the communication channel within the team i.e. within the teachers, parents and children.
	* Though informal talks and discussions are a natural part of the interaction between the teachers some time was formally allotted to it after the children left to periodically focus attention on the actual implementation of integration. Sharing feelings, voicing doubts and resentments helped to bring clarity and collectively seek answers to some questions.
	* Communication with the parents from Special Education Unit was done through a letter informing them about change in student profile with 'joining' of two set ups. Though ideally a dialogue would have been a better approach, it could not be done as most of the Centre's time and efforts were focussed towards implementation of inclusion within the classrooms.
	* Communication with the children - Since the inclusive program implied a change in the school timings of the children who were attending the Inclusive Education Unit, their convenience regarding the same was explored. At an informal level, they were asked about how they would like to study with the children of the Special Education Unit. However more inputs were needed for inquiring about their comparative experiences, impressions about their own learning and the learning environment.
4. **Monitoring work** - Planning and implementation of inclusion was a team effort of the whole staff. This was necessary, as teachers who are actually delivering education in the classroom would also be most effective in planning about it too. However there was also a possibility of their being not able to perceive the situation (within and outside the class) in totality as they were too closely involved in planning and implementation and may become biased about their own impressions or observations. Thus it was decided to make daily observations of the programme. A researcher and teachers, all were involved in this study. The team collectively identified the areas for observation.
During the academic sessions students' verbalisations with peers and teachers were recorded. Observations were made on areas like attending to task behaviour, attending to teacher, assisting each other, seeking feedback from teacher, and showing non task related behaviour. The indoor group work time, snack time and outdoor free play time, were observed for spontaneous seating pattern/group formation among students, playfulness, conversations between children, helping behaviour among them, bossing or use of power, and recognition of specific abilities of peers. Observations were made with respect to Disabled -Disabled, Disabled-Non disabled, Non disabled- disabled, Non disabled-Non disabled, and student-teacher interactions. Teachers were observed for their teaching methods and classroom management during the academic sessions. All these areas were seen as indicators of 'successful' inclusive approach by the team.
The observations also served as a means of self-evaluation and improvement for the whole team. The support staff including the helpers, peon, gardener and accountant were given regular informal orientation by teachers regarding working and 'being' with students and their relationships! At the same same time resistance to change was also experienced.
5. **Strengthening learning situations for all children** - The team reviewed its work in school, analysed the defaults and devised measures to improve.
	* Grouping of students was done carefully so that the learning needs were common. This was a tedious task requiring repeated changes in grouping as the students varied a lot in age, abilities and exposures. Grouping of students was an important task, as it affected not only the learning by all students but also the effectiveness of teacher's inputs.
	* Physical arrangements like seating pattern and arrangement of materials, within the classroom was focussed upon to ensure participation of all students. It was seen that in many instances the difficulties faced by the teacher reduced by attending to these aspects.
	* The need was to link the work planned and actually done with all students. Implementation was as difficult as planning in an inclusive group. Measures in the form of systemization of formulating weekly plans and monthly calendars, monitoring of these by the teachers and the parents, were adopted.
	* Procedures for identification of common and special needs were developed. Focus was on relating and connecting Individualized Education plans for students with disability with the work plans of the whole class.
	* Focus was on joint planning, monitoring for implementation and review by the whole tem and the parents. Series of workshops and meetings were held with the families to work on this aspect. Many parents of students with special needs would question the class work planned and the capacities of their children to be involved in it. Generating a shared understanding in teachers and parents about the learning areas common to all students with and without disability was necessary to link classroom work plans to needs of all students.
	* To ensure integration of all learning areas in different activities, the methods of teaching were continuously reviewed. The curriculum had broad learning areas like physical-motor development, general awareness, and functional reading writing, numeric, social skill development. It was important that any lesson conducted integrated all these. Indicators like participation and attentiveness of all students, smooth implementation of tasks, level of completion of planned task and teachers' self-evaluation, were used for review.
6. **Adapting Curriculum to meet needs of all students** - Curricular guidelines suitable for meeting the learning needs of the students at the Centre were needed. Guidelines provided by the mainstreamed education system, some unique educational experiments in the country and Special Education system were referred to develop these, as none by themselves seemed to suit the needs of the programme. Suitable points from all three were adopted for the Centre. What was needed was delineation of learning areas, subject content under each area, books and teaching material and assessment procedures. Learning areas for the students were identified by referring to all three. The mainstreamed curriculum was extensive in course subjects and contents. These were reduced, simplified or elaborated to meet learning needs of students. The curricular guidelines and materials available of some unique educational programmes and the Special Education system were useful while doing this. Attempt was to use already available books and material as far as possible to maintain connection with the mainstream. Methods of teaching needed adaptation to allow for differences in comprehension between students. Assessment of students was done both informally through their regular work and also formally by conducting written tests, just as those followed in mainstreamed school. The assessment papers were however graded in complexity to suit needs of all- the focus being to assess what all children could do.
7. **Attending to specific problems of children** - In an inclusive set up the attempt was to have common strategies for all students to the extent possible. At times this approach excluded the students with unique difficulties. Attending to these as a special focus helped the team to see it as a special case and also sustain its inputs towards the student. A boy with Autism showed marked disturbance at school during a period of approximately two months. This state created disturbances for other students and hampered the classroom proceedings. Various strategies were adopted with support of his family to deal with this situation. One of the ways adopted at school was to take individual sessions with him outside the classroom by another teacher. The attempt was that his learning area remained the same to that followed in the classroom with other students. Gradually these sessions were shifted to the same classroom and were conducted by the teachers of that group itself. After around two months the teachers were able to get him back to the group he belonged to.
8. **Encouraging participation and involvement of families** - Involving the families of students with special needs was comparatively simpler than encouraging participation of families of non-disabled students. The former could be involved in many of the Centre's activities including three monthly joint review of the work done with their children at the Centre and spending one day at the Centre to observe work with children. The latter group seldom came to the Centre and therefore the teachers made periodic visits to their homes in the slum to discuss issues concerning their children. Special events like sale of used clothes, was successful in bringing these parents to the school premises. It also provided an opportunity to show them the note-copies and other works of their children. It was necessary for them to see that their children were actually learning. Most of the families were not much aware about their ward's actual learning at the Centre and could not guide their children, as they themselves were not literate. The families had a different socio-economic profile. Families who were economically sound, had better educational profile and had better familial relationships seemed to be more involved with the school. It was important to involve all, therefore the Centre needed to plan different activities to ensure participation.
9. **Adoption of the policy of equal participation of all students in all events at or outside the Centre** - This helped in critically evaluating the approaches of working with students as being inclusive in nature or not. E.g. During the participation of the disabled students in 'Special Olympics', the team ensured that the non-disabled went with the participating team as cheering peers to encourage the former. This was the team's attempt at maintaining inclusiveness in a special event. It also helped in carrying the message of inclusion by actual demonstration to other institutions. The Centre received many invitations to send its students with special needs for competitions (theatre, painting). It attempted to convince the organizing institutions to allow the participation of all students even if it meant participating in a non- competitive capacity. The policy was especially helpful in the beginning, as the team had to use all its resources to ensure that all students participated. It also helped the team to see the difference between a segregated and an inclusive approach.

# What do all these experiences reflect?

## Lessons learnt while 'doing inclusion'

The Centre changed the profile of its students that led to changes in its understanding and role. Earlier the Centre worked with children with special needs in the age range 5-15 years. The term 'special needs' was defined as 'disabilities due to cognitive or sensory deficits in combination with motor deficits'. The focus was on integration across various disabilities and different ranges of disability. After adopting inclusion, the Centre opened to children without special needs or disability (from the slum), along with children with special needs (middle/low income groups). There was also about 50% increase in the total number of students (and teaching staff) at the Centre. What happened because of this change?

* **Widening of the concept of special needs:** All children - disabled and non-disabled, were seen as having special needs. The two categories merged and the similarities in their learning needs became evident. The terminology got retained especially for documentation. The long experience of working with the disabled came handy in understanding individual needs of children. It was realized that the non-disabled students too had difficulties in attending, learning and had unique behavioral characteristics (aggression) that required special attention. The assumption was that the non-disabled would be one category requiring a set of teaching learning environment and practices and the non disabled another category requiring some special inputs. However, it became clear that as per the school inputs required, the two categories were not distinct as each student required special attention according to his/her unique characteristic.

'While working with the group of children, at times I felt that both disabled and non- disabled groups were in certain ways groups with special needs. While the needs of the children with special needs seemed special more in terms of their academics, the non-disabled children had special behavioural needs that often needed correction. The 'unruly' behaviour of the adolescent boys from the slum consumed a lot of time and energy.' From a teacher's report
* **Change in individual vs. group approach:** While teaching children with disability, the focus was on individual assessment and planning. The curriculum was individualized and functional in nature. The academic content was analysed and adapted as per the learning capacities of individual student. The focus was on devising student oriented, interesting and new activities. For the inclusive group, this understanding was useful and necessary, but needed to be widened. There was a need to focus equally on group and individual needs. Changes in teaching practices were needed. These included, modifying curriculum in context of mainstreamed curriculum, adopting a combination of group and individual assessment and planning, making use of mainstreamed teaching learning material, and adaptations in instruction methods.
* **Changed understanding of time frame:** When making individualized plans for students with disability, pressures of achieving results within a particular time frame were not present. Even though planning was done for a period of time, the focus was on going at the pace of the child. Mainstreaming was a goal that was defined in context of long-term habilitation of students with disability. With non-disabled studying in the same class along with the disabled, the issue of mainstreaming was of major concern. It was expected of the non-disabled to join mainstreamed schools after attending the Centre's programme. Therefore they were expected to achieve a level of academic skills within a particular time frame - just as it happened in a mainstreamed school. There was thus an increased focus on time frames for achieving targets for students.
* **Broadening of skill requirement of teachers:** The skill requirements of teachers when working with disabled students were on areas like knowledge about disabling conditions, assessment for diagnosis and planning, and teaching strategies for working with individual students or a group of 7-8 students with disability. The skill requirements from a teacher of inclusive group focussed also on understanding classroom organisation and management, speed in work with about 20 students, coordinating work with a co-teacher, and maintaining a common learning focus for a whole group of students with varying abilities.

It had been expected that the non-handicapped students would immediately take up to the school program as the activities planned were based on the principles of child-oriented concept of working with students. Strangely the students did not respond the way as was expected. All of them were eager to attend school and learn. They viewed formal reading writing only as learning and even though enjoyed so-called play way method adopted, did not see it as school task. They did not have the requisite skills for the former and reflected impatience with the latter classroom method. The team needed to learn to understand and provide for these new demands of students- that which they never experienced during their work with the disabled!

The team members themselves belonged to a different social, economic and cultural setup and could not understand for a long time the rules, situations and context of the slum that influenced the reactions and behaviour of children and their parents. In addition, none of them had ever taught non-disabled students and their experience/training in special education had left them with a mind set/style of functioning that maybe was not really suited for the non-disabled students.

'As the pace of learning of the non-disabled children was faster, one had to keep track of it- to ensure that no child suffered - I often wondered if I was being able to do justice to the disabled children in my class. In one particular instance, despite knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that a special child in the class had not mastered the concept being taught, I just had to move on to meet the faster and more advanced learning needs of the non- disabled children in the class. Such instances gave rise to a feeling of guilt in me. I found myself, time and again, in a dilemma. I would time and again question whether what I was doing was right. Whether I was being 'fair' to all the children.' From a teacher's report

The team 'knew' that needs of all students had to be attended to, but needed to learn how to do it. They gradually learnt to attend to aspects of their work like planning, grouping of students for activities, and using teaching learning material graded at different levels of complexity. Theoretically all these aspects are familiar issues in Special Education, but these had to be re-understood in the inclusive setup. For instance, many times it seemed that all the students in the group were studying something different, as per their needs. This was very difficult to manage with 20 students, and the team realized that it could not be a model by other schools that had 50 - 60 students in one classroom!
* **Understanding ways to link with the families:** While working with the students with disability, the Centre took initiative in establishing, maintaining and strengthening contact with families and devising suitable methods. The frequency of contact was high and the response good. In the inclusive set-up the experiences were useful, however the methods needed to change. It was necessary to maintain contact, but was difficult as the number of families increased for the teacher to follow up. The families of the non-disabled did not respond as quickly as the families of the disabled. Methods of linking with families of non-disabled students were changed although the strategy of identifying needs to develop contact methods remained same. Did it mean that their need to be in touch with the teachers/school was less compared to the need of parents of students with disability? Was it a feature unique to parents from the slum who face economic and social constraints that diverted their attention from their child? The Centre was able to develop some common social opportunities for parents of students with and without disability, but was unable to foster interaction between them. Were the methods not effective? Did we understand families well enough?
* **Learning to link with other institutions** - The Centre had been involved in identifying suitable programmes for older students with disability moving out of the Centre. The choice was limited as most of the facilities available were in special setups (sheltered workshops) or with skill training limited to old areas like candle making, carpentry etc. With inclusion, the Centre was able to widen its 'hunt' for vocational training centres to those meant for non-disabled young people. In the process, it was also able to convince one vocational training centre to also enroll students with disability in their programme. The awareness of the Centre about the kind of opportunities available broadened with inclusion. The practice of follow up of students passing out of the Centre helped in being in touch with their emerging needs and in 'matching these with the opportunities available'. The Centre was also able to facilitate the new organisations in inclusion- the openness was already present in them, it only required clarifying certain doubts and streamlining with the families to maintain motivation.
* **Breaking stereotypes**

**Ratio between disabled and non-disabled students** - While planning inclusive programme, it was thought a ratio of 1:4 between disabled and non-disabled students would be appropriate to run the class effectively. However, the experience indicated that in such ratio, the disabled students got neglected as the teachers focus during planning and implementation remained on the non-disabled. When the ratio became almost 1:1, the teachers and the system was forced to concentrate on methods to include all students and to foster participation and learning by all. When the number of disabled was less, they remained on the periphery or invisible and secluded. When the number increased the seclusion became more visible that helped the team to develop methods to counteract it.
 **Acceptance between students** - Non-acceptance of disabled by non-disabled peers was not experienced. In the inclusive set up when the students started school together, the contact was limited initially but there was no rejection. When a new group of special needs children from the Special Education programme joined the inclusive group of students from the Inclusive Education programme, for a few months non-acceptance of the disabled as peers, by the non-disabled students was seen. Analysis of the experience by the team revealed that this was more of reflection of group behaviour, rather the issue of attitudes towards disabled. The interactions improved with careful inputs by the teacher. The same was seen between the teachers of the two groups. The issue seems to be of building cohesiveness within a group. The focus had been on the non-disabled accepting the disabled, however the vice versa was not attended to that consciously. It was evident that if the practices within the class were truly inclusive, it was not difficult to get the group together.

**Learning by all** - Concerns were that either one of the group (disabled or non-disabled) would suffer by being together, as each learnt at a different pace. Initially, there were evidences reflecting non-participation by any one group. This was more because of the ineffective teaching strategies and methods. As the teachers learnt to develop lessons at different levels of complexity and to make groups of students according to common learning needs, the participation improved.

'It was realized that making the entire children do the same task in the name of integration was not furthering the task of disabled children. On closer inspection it was learnt that the level of some non-disabled children in the class was same as that of their disabled counterparts. This non-disabled population comprised largely of adolescent children from the slum and mostly of first generation learners, whereas the disabled children had been attending school for several years. Hence based on the functional levels of the children the class was divided into two for learning language, one area of wide disparity in the children's levels. This proved very beneficial as the children started studying in two groups, both inclusive in nature, at levels which best suited their learning needs.
While learning some mathematical concepts, the class studied together as one group, while for others, they again functioned as two groups or as one group learnt the concept at an abstract level, the disabled children learnt at concrete level (the concept of division).' From a teacher's report

However, this might also be unique situation, as the learning needs of disabled and non-disabled happened to match. The non-disabled mostly had either never been to school or were dropouts. The disabled had been attending the Centre for quite some time and had mastered many skills!

## Some reflections on the curriculum

The developed curriculum was tested / tried in an inclusive setup at the Centre and was able to address the needs of the two sets of the children. Reasons could be that:

* Most of the non-disabled children were first generation learners or drop-outs.
* Needs of the non-disabled were not very different from their disabled counterparts in most of the areas of learning.
* The starting learning point of both the groups was almost similar.
* The learning pace of the two groups was also not very different as no input was provided to non-disabled children at home whereas children with special needs have been attending the Centre for some years and input given by the families was more.
* Curriculum was not bound by any time frame like other regular schools so there was no demands on the students and teachers in terms of finishing a part of the syllabi in a specified period. Teachers used their own discretion for this.

## Responsibility for doing inclusion

When working on inclusion it was realized that it was the responsibility of the whole school-system, teaching and non-teaching staff and administration, to make inclusion happen. The major work seemed to be done by the teachers, but it was necessary to provide a supportive infrastructure for them to be able to do so. They learnt gradually and made mistakes. They resented the change that was reflected in their motivation and interaction with co teachers. They needed to attend training programmes but had to take on the responsibility of informally training the non-teaching support staff. They required a work environment that understood these needs and provided supports. There was a need for training programmes for all the people in the system to make inclusion happen. A common understanding of the group about inclusive approach had to develop for the implementation to be effective. The Centre concentrated on strengthening teamwork especially during the period inclusion was introduced and the concept was being understood.

It was assumed that working as a team will come naturally as the Centre had not faced any difficulties in the past and the work environment was such that it emphasized team approach. However, with the 'pressures' of understanding and providing for the needs of children with differing abilities, conscious efforts were required in assisting each other to remain oriented to learning needs of all students while planning and delivering teaching.

'However there were times when non-disabled jeered at disabled, their behaviours and responses. They still did not want to sit with them by choice. While they had accepted their old classmates with disability, their attitude towards new disabled classmates was not appropriate. At that time as a special educator I became protective about special children and I also discussed the problem with the other teachers.' From a teacher's report

## 'Assessing' inclusion

Inclusion was not merely having disabled and non-disabled in the same class. It meant that certain indicators had to be identified by the system to assess whether inclusion was happening and whether its attempts were effective. School indicators needed to be identified for:

* spontaneous interactions between students;
* interactions between teachers and students;
* participation of students in class-work;
* interactions between people (including parents) in the system and opinions and views on inclusive practices.

Inclusion was not merely having a new unit at the Centre. The inclusive policy was critically viewed in the context of all the programs and activities at the Centre. Inclusive practice was questioned when the Inclusive Education Unit was not 'included' with the Special Education Unit. This was the beginning of new understanding of inclusion as the team was able to see it in the broader context of the Centre.

# Conclusions

When the Centre started with the inclusion programme it looked for methods of doing it. The programme went through its periods of lull, difficulties and doubts. It thought that there were certain special ways of doing it, techniques that can perhaps be read about, studied or learnt from others. Gradually it accepted that this was an approach- the interpretation may be very contextual and the methods vary, in fact developed most effectively by the team involved itself. It also realized that the concept though mainly discussed in context of disability, is applicable to all.

For the Centre inclusion meant that all students with and without disability, should be studying together and be equally involved in the school activities. The team struggled to make this happen and was consciously critical of its attempts while doing it. Gradually the practices required less conscious efforts, and the special needs of each student came to be understood outside the context of disability too.

The team learnt to adapt to and accept the change in their work and roles. The importance of involvement of the support staff and the management staff, along with the teaching staff in following inclusive practices emerged. Team building was an important component as the pressures of change were many. Management's skills were necessary to provide the necessary supports to assist the team.

As the team worked closely together, discussing the problems and issues, going through frictions and dilemmas, and looking for better ways of teaching children, they became more confident of their work. The bonds between the new groups started emerging and there was increase in work satisfaction.

'For a teacher nothing quite parallels an immediate feedback from the students. Having a mixed group of students often gives the teacher clear indicators that some children have understood and learnt. Such a response from the students can be a major source of motivation for the teacher. Some children with disability are less expressive than others. In such cases, the teacher has to be on the look out for indicators of learning. Even a subtle indicator of learning from a child with special needs is very rewarding and is in itself a matter of great joy to the teacher and hence a big motivating push. However in the classroom situation when the group facing the teacher is a responsive one, it serves as a boost to the teacher and the class being an inclusive one provides several opportunities for the same.' From a teacher's report

It was also understood that the Centre's methods were unique to its own needs and situations. In the experience at the Centre, Inclusive practices really emerged after the numbers of students with and without disability became almost equal. Earlier, when the number of non-disabled was more than disabled, the latter were generally left out. Yet, when the numbers increased, there were doubts about the ratio that should be followed to have successful inclusion. Interactions with certain experts further increased the Centre's doubts on its practices. The Centre had a group of students with varied disabilities. Examples of other inclusive programs reflected work with the non-disabled and students with one kind of disability only.

In the same way the Centre did not encounter any major problems concerning acceptance of disabled and non-disabled children studying together from their parents. With inclusion, the Centre's perspective about the external linkages widened and new options became evident.

Even though doubts and difficulties remained, the inclusive program seemed to be favored.

'Inclusion in my experience does seem to work well for both the groups of children. Though the disabled children's academic needs still remain unfulfilled to a certain extent, all the other areas of development, they seem to be at a definite advantage in an inclusive set up as against a special class/ school.'

'I personally believe in inclusion. Both groups of disabled and non-disabled students are improving satisfactorily. I realize that severely disabled children require individual attention, yet they can gradually become part of the inclusive group. I also think if two teachers are working as a team, it is important that there is cooperation and coordination between them so that they are able to work efficiently and smoothly with their class and the progress of children is ensured.' From teachers' reports

The uniqueness in the Centre's experience of Inclusion is that it managed to change its own functioning from a special to and inclusive setup. While earlier, lack of integrated opportunities was a major concern, at times leading to a cynical attitude, now with a demonstration of inclusion within its own program a more proactive attitude got reflected. Organisations for the disabled cannot expect the others to change their style of functioning unless they themselves do not try to do the same. Special schools too need to widen their concern and include the so-called non-disabled to set examples!

The resources involved in developing and running such a programme were high and thus question its replicability. It would be worthwhile considering the adoption of the approach by special setups. It may initially require certain additional inputs but these could gradually reduce by increase in efficient output by the system.

'From Seclusion, Towards Inclusion- The Enabling Centre Experience'# January 2000

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# Through this paper, I have tried to collate my experiences and understanding about running an Inclusive Education Programme. The experiences of the team at the Enabling Centre while it worked on the Inclusive Education programme during 1996 to 1998, the efforts of the staff members and the insights provided by each team member, has enabled the writing of this paper. The academic backing of the Department of Child Development, Lady Irwin College towards the Centre helped it in developing its programme. The critical inputs of Ms. Deepika Nair greatly helped me analyse my experiences while writing this paper. I thank all these of my friends and colleagues.

# Annexure

Programme description

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, funds the Enabling Centre, under its scheme "Experimental and Innovative Programmes for Education at Elementary Stage". It is one of the many projects implemented in different states of India under this scheme.

It started in September 1988 for providing educational support to children with special needs with focus at integration across socio-economic groups and across various abilities. The endeavor is to provide services to families, especially from lower economic group, who are unable to avail the services in special education, these being scanty and expensive. One aim has also been to document experiences and collect research data in the field of childhood disability. Since its inception the Centre continues to give inputs for orienting and training students of Child Development to work with children with disability.

In 1988 the Centre started with 20 children diagnosed as having conditions like Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, visual impairment and epilepsy. All these children belonged to families with low-income status. The Centre worked at developing and providing a comprehensive program for its students. In 1990 the number of children increased to 30 and new children with autism, hearing impairment or learning difficulties joined the program. The Centre introduced pre vocational training for its students and also added new activities for its family support program. By 1995 the Centre's activities had expanded and could be categorized within the two units- Education and Extension. The former included activities like running the educational program for children, development of teaching learning material. The latter included the community outreach attempts through counselling and guidance services and networking with other organisations for vocational training and job placement. In 1996, the Centre initiated a new programme on Inclusive Education with 20 new children with, and without, disability.

**Reference:**
**Title:** From Seclusion, Towards Inclusion: The Enabling Centre Experience
**Author:** Jain, D
**Date:** 2001