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Inclusive Education in Mainstream Classroom

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No two children are alike and no two children learn the same way. There are eight Learning Styles:

- **Visual (spatial):** You prefer using pictures, images and spatial understanding.
- **Aural (auditory-musical):** You prefer using sound and music.
- **Verbal (linguistic):** You prefer using words, both in speech and writing.
- **Physical (kinaesthetic):** You prefer using your body, hands and sense of touch.
- **Logical (mathematical):** You prefer using logic and reasoning.
- **Social (interpersonal):** You prefer to learn in groups or with other people.
- **Solitary (intrapersonal):** You prefer to work alone and use self-study.
- **Natural (nurturing):** You prefer relating information to your natural surroundings.

So why encourage inclusive education in mainstream classrooms?

The concept of including students with disabilities in mainstream education arose in the 1980s and was formally endorsed through UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Salamanca Statement of 1994. Closer home, the Indian Right to Education Act 2009 is quite explicit in mandating the right to a similar kind of education for every child, without discrimination. This article will seek to address some of the issues associated with the practice of inclusion, and offer some practical suggestions on how to do so.

Reasons for resistance amongst schools and arguments against the practice of inclusion are manifold. There is an inherent fear among classroom teachers, which mostly stems from lack of adequate support in providing them with appropriate information and strategies.

A common experience of children with disabilities and their family is rejection. School is the most powerful social institution after family – therefore we have an extremely useful tool to reverse the rejection of society and bring the child to a state of belonging with his or her peers. If the goal of education is to prepare children with disabilities to fit into the world after school, studies (conducted in Australia) have shown that even after half a century of the practice, segregated schools have dismal records of being able to achieve this.

Many who have undergone segregated education and now live in the community are lonely and isolated with limited friends and networks.

On the other hand, there is compelling evidence to show that inclusion is not only good for the child with the disability but also good for the teacher, and 'normal' peers of these students. The child with a disability label has a major developmental impact on teachers on how to teach to diversity more effectively and how to break down or *scaffold* curriculum to make it accessible to all. In fact, this has significant benefits for *all* children, many of whom tend to be easily overlooked in the day-to-day business of the classroom, given the teacher student ratio of 1:30 in most mainstream schools.

One of the goals of any developing society is to promote the values of compassion, tolerance and empathy. Studies have shown that *normal* children in an inclusive classroom show a reduced fear of difference, growth in social awareness, development of personal values and ethics and positive changes such as forming warm and caring friendships.

Effective teaching and learning supports all students, regardless of ability, and instructional elements in teaching of cognitive strategies not only hold benefits for students, they are just as rewarding to the teachers in their development.

Most students who have minor disabilities and behavioural conditions can be easily accommodated in the mainstream classroom if the teacher is made aware of their needs and associated teaching strategies to improve their ability to participate and access learning activities.

Most of the strategies mentioned in this article are, in fact, common to students of all abilities and learning styles. They are recognized as facets of good teaching practice. This section will also seek to identify and discuss the instructional elements for these cognitive strategies.

Scaffolds

The support provided by the teacher helps students bridge the gap between current abilities and the goal. Examples of scaffolds include simplified problems, modelling of the procedures and thinking aloud by the teacher as he or she solves the problem (on the board) with the students.

Scaffolds operate to reduce the complexity of the problems and break them down into manageable chunks.

How does one do this?

Teach the cognitive strategy using small steps

Research shows that using too much of the cognitive strategy at once would swamp the working memory. This research on cognitive processing was derived from studying classrooms of teachers who achieved the highest results when they broke down the task into small steps.

Provide procedural prompts or facilitators

These include specific procedures or suggestions to facilitate the completion of the task. An example is where students are provided with and taught to use on their own, a list of question stems to improve their understanding.

For example –

- *How are _____and _____alike?*
- *What do you think would happen if _____?*
- *What causes_____?*
- *How does _____ tie in with what we have learnt before?*

Provide models of appropriate responses

Modeling is particularly important when teaching cognitive strategies. While teaching literacy, *Nolte* and *Singer (1985)* provided students with questions based on elements of the story grammar. For example, *What action does the leading character initiate? What do you learn about the character from this action?* Here students receive models of questions on the main idea, then practice generating questions of their own.

Anticipate and discuss potential difficulties

The ability to anticipate common errors, and spend time discussing these *before* the students make them is another useful strategy. In a study, the teacher anticipated inappropriate questions students might generate. Students were shown an example of a question that could not be answered by the information provided. They then discussed why it was a poor question.

Guide student practice and then provide independent practice with new examples

The teacher gives hints, reminder of the prompts, reminders of what was overlooked and suggestions of how something could be improved.

Provide rubrics and teach a self-checklist

A self-evaluation checklist is a useful tool for every student to be able to achieve success in an independent manner. Typical examples of questions on the checklist could be –

- *How well did I identify important information?*
- *How well did I link information together?*

Provide feedback and corrections

Feedback typically takes the form of hints, questions and suggestions. This can even be done in groups or using peer-review on summative tasks before the final submission for assessment.

In summary:

1. Present new material in small steps so that the working memory does not become overloaded
2. Guide student practice by (a) supporting them during initial stages, and (b) providing for continuous monitoring of their progress.
3. When teaching higher level tasks, support students with cognitive strategies. Help them to use these strategies by providing them with procedural prompts and modeling the use of these prompts.

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