CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of education is to ensure that all students gain access to knowledge, skills, and information that will prepare them to contribute to immediate community and the society. The central purpose becomes more challenging as schools accommodate students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and abilities. Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. Inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued. India being a multicultural country, Indian classrooms are multicultural in nature. The problems happening in the society are reflected in the classrooms too. Children are likely to face bias, prejudice and feeling of disrespect and unwelcome environment in the classroom. Creating an inclusive environment is necessary to make every student welcome in the school and the classroom.

Concept of Inclusive Education:

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What is inclusion?

Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. Inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued.

Inclusive schools put the values upon which countries like India and America are founded that is- pluralism, tolerance, and equality into action; they ask teachers to provide appropriate

individualized supports and services to all students without the stigmatization that comes with separation. At no time does inclusion require the classroom curriculum, or the academic expectations, to be watered down. On the contrary, inclusion enhances learning for students, both with and without special needs. Students learn, and use their learning differently; the goal is to provide all students with the instruction they need to succeed as learners and achieve high standards, alongside their friends and neighbours.

Research shows that most students learn and perform better when exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum, as long as the appropriate strategies and accommodations are in place.

Equity requires securing all children's rights to education, and their rights within and through education to realize their potential and aspirations. It also requires implementing and institutionalizing arrangements that help ensure all children can achieve these aims.

The Promise of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students.

- Inclusion is an effort to make sure that diverse learners – those with disabilities, different languages and cultures, different homes and family lives, different interests and ways of learning – are exposed to teaching strategies that reach them as individual learners

- Inclusive schools ask teachers to provide appropriate individualized supports and services to all students without the stigmatization that comes with separation

- Teachers in inclusive classrooms vary their styles of teaching to enhance learning for all students

Some children that are particularly at risk of not attending orcompleting school are:

- ✓ Those from poor families
- ✓ Those inremote rural communities
- ✓ Girls
- ✓ Children infected with oraffected by HIV
- ✓ Children from ethnic or other minority groups
- ✓ Children from ethnic or minority groups who are affected by conflict or natural disaster.

Inclusion requires responding to the diversity of needs among all learners, through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion from and within education. It involves changes in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, driven by a common vision that covers all children and the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all of them.

Multiculturalism in India and its concerns

India is a multicultural society. It is a Union of 29 states 7 Union Territories. Every state is categorized by its distinct geographical features and culture which comprises of different language, dressing styles, diet, art forms, dance forms, mannerisms, festivals and traditions. Throughout India's history, religion has been an important part of the country's culture. Hinduism is the major religion and Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism are the other minor religions followed by the people of India. Each religion with its denominations worships distinct deities with different beliefs, values, traditions, festivals and places of significance.With regards to gender, discriminatory attitudes towards women have existed for generations in India. Historically women have been an oppressed group. Although the constitution of India has granted women equal rights but gender disparities remains. Women are disadvantaged at work, and are often underestimated for their capabilities. Women are considered the weaker sex. Female infanticide, a sex-selective abortion, is adopted which strongly reflects the low status of Indian women. There is diversity in terms of people living in the urban areas and people living in rural areas with a variably different culture. Along with these there are regional and communal clashes still happening in India.

Differences in religious practices, beliefs and values result in differences of opinions. These differences sometimes may strain the relationships between people belonging to different religions.These differences in opinions may sometimes be responsible for sarcastic remarks being passed towards students of different communities and also to a certain extent be responsible in developing prejudice towards some students.Girl children come to school with different cultural backgrounds. Some cultures which suppress the females to greater extent. Therefore, students in Indian classrooms may be facing the following issues:

- Bias and Prejudice towards students of religions and states in India
- Students become target of ridicule because of their race, color, etc.
- Gender bias even in classrooms
- Students face adjustment problems when parents migrate to different states or when parents migrate from rural areas to urban areas. Students have to study a new

compulsory regional language andface competitive peer or have to study in a different board.

- Stereotyping happens even at schools. Some communities are stamped as 'miser', 'cunning', 'loud', 'violent', etc.

Therefore, schools need to give special attention to the needs of these students who are likely to face problems like low self-esteem and the feeling of being disrespected and unwelcome in the classroom. Given below are some tips on how to create a diverse, multicultural, and inclusive class environment, with specific suggestions on how to teach about prejudice and how to handle students who display discriminatory behavior.

Creating an Inclusive Environment

- Make sure that classroom posters, pictures, books, music, toys, dolls, and other materials are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, family situations, disabilities, and so on. Varied representations are not only important for making diverse student populations feel included

- Avoid having only one or two tokens of a particular group, and vary the roles depicted for each group. For example, show women and men doing jobs both inside and outside the home. Likewise, show different family configurations, including single-parent families, extended families, multiracial families, adopted families, etc.

- Make sure your school library, corridors, and other public spaces are also diverse and inclusive, either by buying new materials that show people from a variety of backgrounds and situations, or by adding people to existing materials (e.g., by having students paint them in).

- Try to involve other supportive teachers, administrators, staff members so that you are not the only one modeling a concern for inclusive classrooms and school settings.

- If biased materials remain visible, use them as opportunities to teach children to think about issues of bias. For example, you might ask students to tell you how the item in question would make a target of bias feel, or you might use the item to explain how to identify instances of bias.

- Make a special effort to use language that is unbiased, inclusive, and does not divide students unnecessarily. For example, "Okay everyone..." is less likely to reinforce gender divisions than "Okay, boys and girls..."

- Be careful not to unwittingly contribute to gender discrimination. If girls are complimented on appearance and boys on achievement, girls will soon learn that female achievement is of secondary importance.

- Conduct activities like debates on status of women in India, female foeticide, women achievers in India and abroad, etc.

Addressing Children's Questions and Concerns

- When children ask a question related to prejudice or group differences, be sure to answer directly rather than side-stepping the question or changing the topic. Otherwise, children may infer that they should not ask about these issues, and that there is something shameful to avoid. Instead, reinforce children's natural curiosity, and explain the distinction between noticing social differences and being prejudiced.

- Do not minimize or pretend not to see differences in race, religion, disability, or other attributes. Acknowledging obvious differences are not the problem -- placing negative value judgments on them is. For example, color-blindness is vitally important when it comes to educational opportunities, but color-blindness does not mean ignoring an attribute that students may see as important to their identity.

- If children mention social differences, do not criticize or discourage their observations (e.g., "It isn't polite to look"). Rather, talk to them about their observations and answer any questions they have. Give opportunity to students to discuss differences and sometimes discuss reasons for differences. (e.g. types of garments worn in different states in India vary because of geographical reasons)

- If a student's question makes you uncomfortable, do your best to answer it on the spot, but then take time later to reflect on what made you uncomfortable. If you suspect yourself of harboring biases or you still aren't sure how best to handle situation, seek feedback from trusted colleagues, friends, and family members.

- Keep parents involved and informed. Tell them what types of questions their children are asking and what answers you are giving. This will lessen the chances that children receive mixed messages from school and home.

Integrating Children's Own Experiences

- Use whatever diversity exists among your students to model inclusiveness. For example, if students are about to do an activity that is difficult for a disabled student to do, invite students to help adapt the activity so that everyone can participate. Under the right circumstances, such an approach can establish a norm of inclusiveness and reward students for valuing each other's participation.

- Be sure not to single out minority students or call on them unsolicited to represent their group. When discussing families, cultures, lifestyles, and social groups, vary the

focus and the order of presentation to avoid implicitly conveying an order of importance (e.g., use "she or he" as well as "he or she").

- Avoid a "tourist approach" to multiculturalism that limits diversity to holidays, special events, and history months. Instead, integrate various cultures and backgrounds into the everyday life of the classroom, and invite students to enrich discussions with their own ethnic traditions and experiences.

- If you notice gender or racial segregation during play times, reorganize the activities or play area to foster integration and reduce stereotypes. For example, if girls gravitate toward playing house and dressing up, relocate woodworking tools near the house for home repairs, and include dress-up props such as a doctor's bag, police badge, tool belt, or hard hat.

Dealing with Discriminatory Behavior

- Do not ignore discriminatory behavior. Avoiding the problem will not make it go away, and your silence may even give the appearance of tacit approval. Instead, make it clear that you will not tolerate racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or other offensive jokes, slurs, or behaviors, and explain why. If you cannot respond at the time the incident takes place, respond as soon after as possible before the problem worsens.

- Do not expect deep-seated problems and conflicts to disappear immediately. Unlearning prejudice and developing social awareness is a lifelong process, and it is unrealistic to expect instant results with young children.

- Do not humiliate prejudiced students who make mistakes or behave badly. Humiliating students is not only unkind, it often deepens their feelings of resentment and rivalry without addressing the underlying causes of prejudice. The best approach is a compassionate effort to understand what went wrong and what might be done to avoid similar episodes in the future.

- Make empathy training as central to your lesson plans as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Empathy can be taught effectively with role-playing and role-reversal exercises, and research suggests that greater empathy is significantly associated with reductions in prejudice, aggression, and interpersonal conflict.

- Be a role model who walks the talk and takes a stand for social justice. Reflect and practice inclusive multicultural values in all aspects of your life, not just while class is in session. Demonstrate that you respect and value the knowledge, talents, and diversity of all people.

- Look to improve yourself as well as your students. Learn more about prejudice and social justice -- not only the forms of bias that affect you most directly, but the forms that affect other groups as well.

In conclusion there is a need to reflecting on equity and inclusive education in schools

- In my school, who needs to be included and why?
- What measures and practices are currently in place to support their inclusion?
- What measures and practices are needed and how would they benefit my school?
- How can I contribute towards creating an inclusive environment?

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