

Inclusive education



Inclusive education ranks as one of the most important challenges facing governments and educators throughout the world. This article examines four key questions:

- What is it?
- Why is it important?
- What are the impediments to its implementation?
- How can it be implemented?

What is inclusive education?

Underlying the notion of inclusive education is a recognition that learners have diverse abilities and interests, and that they come from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. Inclusive education can therefore be simply defined as 'Education that Fits'. In other words, education must fit the diversity of learners we find (or should find) in every school, in every classroom, in every country. Expressed another way, an inclusive school is 'A School for Everyone'.

Until recently, inclusive education was largely focused on children with special educational needs arising from learning or behavioural difficulties. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing education policy-makers is extending the principle of inclusive education to such learners and this will be the focus of the article. Now, however, it is being broadened to address the diverse needs of *all* learners. For example, a recent UNESCO conference acknowledged that 'inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination' (UNESCO, 2008).

Why is inclusive education important?

There are three main arguments in favour of inclusive education for learners with special educational needs. Firstly, if it is handled properly, all learners will gain academically and socially and will improve their self-esteem. Secondly, given the expense involved in transporting and accommodating learners with special needs in special schools, especially in rural areas, inclusive education is more economically viable. Thirdly, research into the effects of inclusive education shows that if it is properly implemented, not only does it benefit learners with special education needs, but it also provides positive outcomes for other learners. Fourthly, and most importantly, inclusive education should be seen as a fundamental right, not just for learners with special educational needs, but for all learners.

In 1948, the UN promulgated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *Inter alia*, this Declaration affirmed that elementary education should be free and compulsory. Unfortunately, as T.S. Eliot expressed it in *The Hollow Man*,

*Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow*

This gap between rhetoric and reality is nowhere more sharply evidenced than in the disturbing estimate of 72 million children of primary school age being out of school (one-third of these children are in the Commonwealth). This, and associated data on such factors as gender disparities and the exclusion of children with disabilities, has led the world body to come up with a series of Declarations and Conventions, four of which have contemporary significance.

- The first – the Dakar Framework for Action, affirmed by 164 governments – set 2015 as the date for implementing the principle of Education for All (UNESCO, 2000).
- This was followed by the second – the United Nations Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000). Among the Millennium Development Goals were two of particular significance for inclusive education: the achievement of Universal Primary Education by 2015 and the elimination of gender disparities in education by 2005.
- The third is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the UN in December 2006 and in the process of being ratified by individual countries (50 as of March 2009). As far as inclusive education is concerned, Article 24 is the critical one. It requires Member States to provide education of persons with disabilities that fosters their participation in society, their sense of dignity and self-worth, and the development of their personality, abilities and creativity.
- The fourth significant event builds on the previous three and promises to be a highly significant event in the advancement of inclusive education. In November 2008, UNESCO devoted the 48th session of its International Conference on Education, held in Geneva, to the theme of 'Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future'. This conference was attended by delegates from 153 Member States and representatives of 20 intergovernmental organisations, 25 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations and other institutions of civil society. *Inter alia*, the delegates affirmed that Member States should:

- (i) recognise the importance of a broadened concept of inclusive education that addresses the diverse needs of all learners;
- (ii) further accelerate the attainment of Education for All goals;
- (iii) address social inequity and poverty levels as priorities;
- (iv) promote school cultures and environments that are child-friendly, conducive to effective learning and inclusive of all children, healthy and protective, gender-responsive, and encourage the active role and the participation of the learners themselves, their families and their communities;
- (v) consider as appropriate the ratification of all international conventions related to inclusion and, in particular, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted in December 2006;
- (vi) provide for the participation and consultation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes, as the overall responsibility of fostering inclusion implies the active engagement of all social actors, with the government playing a leading and regulatory role in accordance with national legislation when applicable;
- (vii) strengthen the links between schools and society to enable families and the communities to participate in and contribute to the educational process;
- (viii) develop early childhood care and education programmes that promote inclusion as well as early detection and interventions related to whole child development;
- (ix) train teachers by equipping them with the appropriate skills and materials to teach diverse student populations and meet the diverse learning needs of different categories of learners through methods such as professional development at the school level and pre-service training about inclusion;
- (x) encourage innovative research in teaching and learning processes related to inclusive education.

(UNESCO, 2008.)

What are the impediments to inclusive education?

Reasons for the policy–practice gap vary greatly from country to country. They include such barriers as antagonistic social and cultural beliefs, economic factors, a lack of mechanisms to ensure compliance, conservative attitudes among teachers and teacher educators, parental resistance, a lack of skills among teachers, rigid curricula and examination systems, fragile democratic institutions, inadequate educational infrastructures, particularly in rural and remote areas, large class sizes, the dominance of the medical model of disability, and a top-down introduction of inclusive education without adequate preparation of schools and communities (Mitchell, 2005).

How can inclusive education be implemented?

Inclusive education is a multi-dimensional concept, its successful implementation requiring consideration of what could be called the ‘Magic Formula’.

Inclusive Education = V + P + 5As + S + R + L

V = Vision

Inclusive education requires a commitment from educators at all levels of the system.

P = Placement

Placement in age-appropriate classrooms in learners’ neighbourhood schools is a necessary (but not sufficient) requirement for inclusive education.

5As=

(i) Adapted Curriculum

Making appropriate adaptations or modifications to the general curriculum is central to inclusive education and is probably the biggest challenge to educators.

(ii) Adapted Assessment

It is essential that assessment serve educational purposes by promoting learning and guiding teaching, not simply functioning as a tool for sorting and selecting learners for advancement.

(iii) Adapted Teaching

Inclusive education challenges educators to develop a wide repertoire of evidence-based teaching strategies, i.e., *clearly specified methods that have been shown by good quality research to be effective in bringing about desired outcomes in learners.*

There is sound evidence that teaching strategies such as the following are effective for learners with special educational needs: co-operative group teaching, peer tutoring, supportive classroom climate, social skills training, cognitive strategy instruction, self-regulated learning, memory strategies, phonological awareness and phonological processing, behavioural approaches, functional, behavioural assessment, direct instruction, review and practice, formative assessment and feedback, assistive technology, and augmentative and alternative communication. Indeed, most of these strategies have been shown to be effective for *all* learners (Mitchell, 2008).

(iv) Acceptance

Inclusive education relies on educators, learners and their parents accepting the right of learners with special educational needs to be educated in general education classrooms and to receive equitable resourcing.

(v) Access

For learners with physical disabilities to be included, adequate access to classrooms must be provided, e.g., ramps and lifts, adapted toilets and adequate space for wheelchairs.

S = Support

Inclusive education for learners with special educational needs requires support from a team of professionals in addition to regular classroom teachers. These would include such people as teacher aides/assistant teachers, specialist advisers and appropriate therapists.

R = Resources

Clearly, inclusive education requires adequate levels of funding (but no more than would normally be provided in special schools).

L = Leadership

To bring all of the above elements of the 'Magic Formula' together, leadership is required at all levels: government, national and local education authorities, principals and classroom teachers.

Conclusion

Inclusive education involves more than just placing children with special educational needs in regular classes and hoping for the best. It really means that schools have to re-examine what they teach, how they teach and how they assess learner's performances. In short, it requires a paradigm shift in education – for the benefit of all learners.

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