

How a Special School Became an Inclusive School

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Teachers should refrain from labelling a child as a slow learner or stubborn. What is needed is a little extra effort and patience. It is important for teachers to adopt a flexible approach and not rely on a single method. This may seem challenging, but with a little extra effort and patience, it becomes easier and helps build a child's confidence, which plays an important role in learning.

The state of Mizoram has the second-highest literacy rate in India, after Kerala. Mizo society is built on the code of ethics called '*Tlawmngaihna*', where everyone is expected to be hospitable, kind, unselfish, and helpful to others.

I set up a Special School for children with hearing impairment in 2018. The first batch had only 10 preschool students in the age range of 2.5 to 6 years. The need for such a school was felt by the parents of children with hearing impairment to whom I was providing speech therapy. These children were dropping out of mainstream schools due to academic and emotional difficulties. 5-year-old Soma was one such child.

Soma has severe hearing loss and learning difficulties. He had been wearing a hearing aid for 2.5 years and was receiving regular speech therapy, which improved his language skills. Seeing Soma's progress, Soma's parents developed high expectations and enrolled him in a mainstream school when he was 4 years old. Soma was excited and happy to go there. However, he needed support in his home assignments and oral presentations, which his teacher could not provide. Soma's progress suffered. His teacher suggested remedial classes after school, but his parents felt that he did not fit well in the mainstream school and decided to enrol him in our special school. With continuous speech therapy and support, Soma regained his confidence.



Figure 1. Children looking at picture books of their choice.

The first batch of 10 preschool students made remarkable progress, all of them wore hearing aids and received speech therapy every day. At the same time, we had a growing understanding of 'inclusion' as a school. The term 'inclusion' makes both regular teachers and special educators guarded because it seems impossible to implement. We too wondered how inclusion is effectively practised in those schools that claim to be inclusive. Initially, we associated inclusion primarily with including children with disabilities, but we learnt that inclusion encompasses all children regardless of their background, physical or intellectual abilities, emotional health, economic status, or family background, etc. We realised that many teachers already practise inclusion unknowingly. For example, adjusting the classroom lighting so that children can see the blackboard clearly is an act of inclusion by the teacher.

With this growing understanding, we opened the doors of our school to all children in April 2024. Thirteen students were enrolled in preschool – one with hearing impairment, one with speech impairment (cleft lip and palate), one with anal atresia, three with low Social Quotient, and seven students without disabilities. Opening an inclusive preschool was a significant and challenging effort due to the emotional barriers and stigma associated with disability in society.

Three 'tools' have been especially helpful in making our preschool more inclusive.

1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL): UDL is a framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible, inclusive, equitable, and challenging for every learner. The underlying belief of UDL is to change the design of the environment instead of seeing a perceived deficit within the learner as a problem. Let us understand this better with the example of 6-year-old Timothy.

Timothy needed an hour to complete tasks that his classmates could finish in 15 minutes. He made excuses to avoid study time and could not sit still for even a few minutes to write. Timothy's teacher called his parents to school and shared these challenges, also informing them how Timothy was still unable to identify letters and numbers and had bad handwriting. Interestingly, Timothy's parents shared that he was always very occupied at home, creating toy houses and other structures using junk materials, like empty bottles and cardboard boxes. The teacher was pleasantly surprised after this exchange and adjusted her strategy. She reduced pen-and-paper tasks and focused more on playful activities, such as cutting and pasting letters and numbers using



Figure 2. A child rolling out dough as for a chapati.

foam sheets and asking Timothy to notice letters on hoardings and signboards whenever he was outside. By changing the approach, Timothy's parents and teacher observed his developing interest in letters and numbers.

2. National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022: The NCF-FS is the first such curriculum framework for the Foundational Stage and is built on the principle of equity and inclusion. The suggested trajectory of learning outcomes for the different domains of development, along with guidelines for inclusive content selection, pedagogy, assessment, and learning environment pave the way for inclusion in early childhood education.

Loma was 4 years old and very fond of junk food, expressing a strong dislike for nutritious, home-cooked meals. As the situation was dire, Loma's parents sought the help of an occupational therapist, who deduced that Loma disliked having no say in the meals cooked at home. At school, Loma's teachers focused on the learning outcome of 'Showing a liking for and understanding of nutritious food and not wasting food.' They took the children's help in creating a weekly tiffin routine. During mealtime,

children were encouraged to sit together and share their tiffin with each other. This approach helped not only Loma in trying new and nutritious dishes; it helped all the other children in class as well.

3. Child activity matrix: The activity matrix is a visual tool to organise teaching-learning opportunities

throughout the school day. Class routines are listed in the first column and the names of students (requiring specific support) are in the top row. The resultant matrix is used to list the specific goals for each child. This tool can be used by both teachers and parents to identify where and how the child needs support.

Table 1. Activity matrix for three children – Soma, Timothy, and Loma

Activity	Soma (5 years)	Timothy (6 years)	Loma (4 years)
Morning assembly	Greeting peers and teachers	Sitting still for 3 minutes during quiet time	
Circle time	Using a communication board	Sharing new models/constructions with peers	Suggesting more food items for the next weekly tiffin routine
Story time	Noticing pictures used during storytelling		Responding to thinking questions on a story about eating habits
Outdoor activity	Cooperative play using physical prompts	Tracing letters in the sand pit	
Tiffin time	Requesting items using basic gestures		Sharing tiffin with peers
Emergent literacy	Sequencing story cards of three panels	Cutting out letters out of foam sheets and pasting them in sequence on the wall	
Sensory play	Exploring vibrations using different objects (including musical instruments)	Playing with letters and numbers in set puzzles Collecting and constructing using junk materials	
Dispersal time	Saying goodbye to peers		

Endnotes

i. Know more about Universal Design for Learning and its principles at <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>



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