

# Small Steps to Inclusive Practices

Jayna Jagani and Rima Kaur

Inclusion does not mean only making big policy changes or waiting for those to come to our schools. Mrs Anita and Mrs Babita are teachers without specialised training in inclusive education, cross-disability education, or even special education, yet they make efforts to tailor their lessons to meet the needs of their learners.



Figure 1. Inclusion means the participation of all children.

## Vignette 1

Harshita is 6 years old. She goes to a low-fee private school in rural Meerut. When Harshita was 4 years old, her mother fell seriously ill because of which Harshita had to discontinue school for more than a year. She rejoined school when she was about 6 years old. This led to a gap in her learning. The school advised Harshita's parents to help her practise reading and writing so that she would be able to cope with the syllabus.

The varied demands of English and Hindi grammar, mathematics, etc. in class I overwhelmed Harshita. Any form of written work began to frustrate her. She began to hit other children, screaming and at times crying. When this became a regular affair, the school called Harshita's parents. Her mother was supportive and tried to notice her triggers of violent behaviour. 'Ma'am, please pay more attention to her, you know how she is. You give her work in class, and I will get the remaining work done at home,' Harshita's mother requested the teacher.

Mrs Anita, the teacher, decided to help Harshita by reducing her writing load. If the class had to write 8-10 words, Harshita was asked to write only 4-5. Mrs Anita wrote down the questions in Harshita's notebook so that Harshita could focus on the responses. Mrs Anita also introduced techniques like deep breathing and using flashcards of various emotions (happy/sad/angry/frustrated). Harshita is now managing her emotions better, interestingly, so are the others in her class!

## Vignette 2

12-year-old Mayur was diagnosed with epilepsy a few years after starting school. Though mild, he had frequent seizures. His parents took him to the few doctors they could afford. Mayur's condition is now stable. However, he frequently feels drowsy in class due to the medication. Though he has developed language and numeracy abilities to a fair degree, he finds it difficult to focus during a 40-minute period.

Mayur's mother looks after his physical health, but she has started calling him 'lazy' and 'useless'. Mayur's father has become quiet, withdrawn, and disinterested in Mayur's schooling. He is reluctant to engage in any form of discussion about Mayur.

His parents enrolled Mayur in a low-fee private school in class V. Ms Babita, the teacher, noticed that letting Mayur take a short nap during the day dramatically increases his alertness and activity in class. She also organises group activities so that other children get to know Mayur as a friend. He goes out and plays games like everyone else. Ms Babita also tries to understand Mayur's medical condition and keeps track of his progress.

One day, Mayur had a mild seizure in class. The entire class helped him. Such experiences reassured Mayur's parents, who hesitatingly enquired about his well-being in school from Ms Babita during a parent-teacher meeting.

## Including all children

Both Harshita and Mayur are children without disabilities. Both are sent to low-fee private schools in the vicinity. Both experienced exclusion, and in the case of Mayur, the home environment itself is exclusionary as he experiences name-calling and emotional neglect from his family. Inclusion is often associated with including children with disabilities, however, to be inclusive is to welcome and support all children.

Harshita experienced an interruption in her schooling, leading to challenges in learning. Interruptions in schooling due to an illness or death in the family, poor health, financial crises, seasonal migration, violence in conflict areas, etc., are not uncommon. Harshita resorted to unpleasant behaviour as a way of coping. We see how her mother understands the issue and tries to cooperate with the school. Most parents do not put in this effort.

In Mayur's case, we learn how epilepsy as a long-term condition can significantly alter the quality of a child's schooling and life. Epilepsy is often called a hidden or invisible disability because it does not make itself apparent unless someone has a seizure. It invites stigma and discrimination. Mayur is also at high risk of experiencing learning difficulties and needs a supportive environment.

## Inclusion in all landscapes

Harshita's teacher, Mrs Anita, makes efforts to ensure that Harshita is not overly burdened. Mrs Anita is mindful of applying age-old maxims of teaching, such as considering the prior knowledge of the learner and scaffolding her, bringing authenticity to learning by connecting lessons/concepts to real-life experiences, showing sensitivity towards her pace of learning and developmental progression, and presenting the right degree of challenge so that learning does not induce boredom but is fun and engaging. In short, Mrs Anita shows how inclusion can be exercised simply by being an observant, sensitive, and mindful teacher.

Mayur's teacher, Ms Babita, prioritises his physical and socio-emotional well-being. While it is important for Mayur to be supported to do well academically, the first step is to ensure that he feels welcomed, comfortable, and safe in school. Ms Babita not only gained the confidence of Mayur's parents but also ensures that Mayur is not stigmatised or discriminated against in school.

Harshita and Mayur's cases highlight the struggles of schools and teachers in supporting children who need care and attention beyond the norm, where chance encounters with hardworking teachers lead to meaningful

learning experiences. Mrs Anita and Ms Babita practise small pedagogical acts to make children feel comfortable in the class and learn better. Imagine the power they can wield if they are further equipped and resourced!

### Inclusive education as a right

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 made education the fundamental right of every child in our country between 6 and 14 years of age, including children with disabilities (GoI, 2009). Furthermore, the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 states that any child with a benchmark disability between the ages of 6 and 18 years of age has the right to free education (GoI, 2016).

The RTE and RPwD are landmark Acts in our country. However, access does not equal inclusion. It is possible for a diverse group of children, including children with disabilities, all going to the same school and being taught the same curriculum by the same teacher in the same timetable, to experience a range of exclusions every single day.

Here are some questions that teachers can ask themselves to understand if their classrooms are inclusive for all children. These can be seen as guidelines for creating inclusive classrooms.

Aspects of curriculum	First steps	Next steps
Learning environment (physical)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there distracting light or noise inside/near the classroom?</li> <li>• Are materials and other resources within easy reach of all children?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the classroom space comfortable for all children?</li> <li>• Are the blackboard and other display areas clearly visible?</li> <li>• Is the arrangement of furniture flexible and conducive to learning?</li> </ul>
Learning environment (social)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do children feel free to drink water or go to the toilet?</li> <li>• Are the children free to ask questions and share their feelings in class??</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the children like coming to school every day?</li> <li>• Do they like talking about their day with you and their friends?</li> <li>• Do they call you if they want to share something or need help?</li> </ul>
Daily routine/ Time table	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do children have to sit for long periods of time?</li> <li>• Are there periods where you find children disengaged or tired?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is each period of a length that is appropriate for the children?</li> <li>• Is there a period which provides children with a choice in activity?</li> <li>• Are there designated toilet and lunch breaks?</li> </ul>
Content (textbooks and other TLMs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the content related to children’s daily lives and experiences?</li> <li>• Does the content represent topics and themes that interest children?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the content responsive to the socio-cultural context of learners?</li> <li>• Have you modified the content so that it is accessible to all children?</li> <li>• Is the content multisensorial and represented in different formats?</li> </ul>
Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is your pedagogy play-based with scope for children to interact?</li> <li>• Are children’s prior experiences included and valued?</li> <li>• Do you welcome children’s home languages?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a balance of activities for all the domains of development?</li> <li>• Do you scaffold learners in ways that they learn best?</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you observe children in different settings?</li> <li>• Are there different ways for children to express what they know?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a reduced emphasis on paper-pencil tests/exams or worksheets?</li> <li>• Is there a balanced assessment of all domains of development?</li> <li>• Do insights from assessment inform your lesson plans?</li> </ul>

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underlines inclusion as one of the fundamental principles of education, particularly in light of the gaps in education experienced by students coming from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

MoE, 2020, p. 24

Inclusion – The act of including; ensuring that each child has an equitable opportunity to participate in all school and classroom processes regardless of their individual learning differences.

*National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage, 2022, p. 340*

### Small steps to inclusive practice

Where there are humans, there shall be diversity - of language, family, culture, learning needs, interests and so

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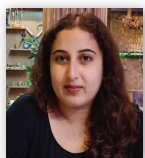
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much more. Hence, it is the responsibility of mainstream schools to provide inclusive education. Society certainly cannot be inclusive if our schools are not.

Big changes in policy are important – they bring attention to infrastructure, curriculum, textbooks and other resource materials, pedagogy, and assessment. But inclusion does not mean only making big changes or waiting for those big changes to come to our schools. Both Mrs Anita and Mrs Babita are teachers without specialised training in inclusive education, cross-disability education, or even special education, yet they make efforts to best tailor their lessons to meet the needs of their learners.

The theory of inclusion has been discussed for quite some time. The **act** of inclusion has been a result of larger demands for social justice, civil rights, and voices of the vulnerable (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). Teachers, teacher educators, and even parents must be sensitised and equipped with the know-how of **acting** to include.