



Equal Opportunities for All

By

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Equal Opportunities for Children in School

Introduction

The European Disability Forum's (EDF) in an article on the 'Right to Education' states that every child has a right to compulsory education. Indeed, there is a worldwide move toward inclusion of all children in the regular school classroom. This paper will discuss how this can be done successfully for the benefit of all children as the current school environment model would not be able to meet the needs of children with disabilities. It would seem that education authorities in a number of countries believe that inclusion of all children in the classroom is the way forward in providing equal opportunities for children. All children, however, are not born equal and some children require more than a educational approach in order to reach their potential.

To clarify the issue, we should first seek to define inclusion and ask if the term is being used to depict all children physically in the one room, or is it all children accessing the same academic programme regardless of their needs or abilities? Either approach is laden with problems and will not provide equal opportunities for all. For children with neuro-physiological disorders, for example, to progress and reach their potential a combined educational and medical approach is needed. To be successful, inclusion requires an increase in trained professionals academic and health specialized resources. Children need to be challenged at a just-right level in order to develop physically, and academically. For children to be randomly placed, or chronologically placed, in school classrooms will first require intensive assessments and individual learning programmes.

Second, each class will have to offer a number of curriculum pathways for children to progress at their own pace and ability.

In progressing to a philosophy of inclusion will require the integration of a learning philosophy with an educational philosophy in order to move to a child-centred approach in schools. The creation of such a diverse programme and the need for a high level of professionals, however, will take time to plan and implement and, prove to be expensive.

European Disability Forum

The EDF's 'right to education' states that every child with a disability should have access to compulsory education and this should all be provided in a mainstream school setting.

The UN convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which amounts to a right to inclusive education should not be diminished by this convention. The focus is on providing a quality education for all children with disabilities. Inclusion for all children is admirable as many children today are not in any programme as there are long waiting lists for special schools and for some children those for example on the Autistic Spectrum and those requiring vocational programmes there are very few to no programmes available. Children with disabilities have special complex needs and along with academics need a learning development programme to help them achieve their potential and be successful and have a happy experience in school and life.

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities range from mild disabilities to severe disabilities.

Children with severe physical and mental impairments will not be able to participate in an academic programme and will require a special programme for them to meet their needs and to increase their independence and quality of life. To consider a child with this level of severity in a class with a typical child and expect a teacher to meet the needs of both children is discriminating against both children. A typically developing child will not get the attention required and the severely disabled child will be neglected as they require very different programmes. It would be more beneficial to both groups of children if a programme in the school in a different class which was designed for severely disabled children could be used. To have children in the same school and integrated in social and community activities would be possible and beneficial. Children who have a physical impairment and have no intellectual impairment should, without a doubt, be included in the mainstream class and any aids and adaptations supplied as needed.

Children with no physical limitations and an intellectual impairment may or may not benefit from the regular academic classroom. Children with down's syndrome for example vary in their ability as there is a variance in any population. Parent's pressured a school to take their daughter and with hindsight felt that she was socially isolated, however with inclusion of other children with the same difficulties this may resolve that disadvantage. A teacher observed that the child with down's syndrome progressed in social and communication skills better in a mainstream classroom but when they reached grade $\frac{3}{4}$ the gap of their development was widening and they were no longer cute. It may be more appropriate to provide a vocational programme for children with intellectual impairments when they get older as the academic programme will be unsuitable for them.

A child with Downs Syndrome was supported by the British Institute for Learning Development in a mainstream school in 2001 in Sharjah. This was new for the UAE and has in the end been successful however it was challenging in the beginning as some of the teaching staff were against this child's inclusion in the school. This can often come from fear and lack of knowledge of how to manage the needs of a child with developmental delay. There is also not an appreciation that children can grow and develop their independence and skills in life. A parent was seen openly ridiculing the child in the playground suggesting that a private school was not the appropriate place for a child with down's syndrome.

What, therefore, is the perception of the role of a school in a community? School is where we grow, learn and develop into social human beings not only for academic achievers.

This attitude against special needs children is not reflected in the UAE in general: A country with a diverse cultural and ethnic population who live in harmony. Children with intellectual impairments such as children with Down's Syndromes can grow and develop and be supported to achieve their potential even if it is lower than societies academic norms. Schools should not just be academic centres but environments where children can also develop emotionally, socially, vocationally and be part of society.

Children with no physical or intellectual impairment can have a neurophysiological sensory processing disorder known commonly as children with learning difficulties. They may present with difficulties with reading and spelling (dyslexia), self regulation (Attention Deficit), maths (dyscalculia), speech and language delay, and

handwriting(dysgraphia) are some examples of the difficulties observed. These children may range from low intellectual ability to gifted intellectual ability. Sensory processing is not directly related to intellectual ability but it can affect a child's ability to achieve their intellectual potential. A sensory processing disorder can affect a child's ability to access school curriculums and achieve their inherent potential. These children don't look physically any different and are not obviously special needs this can have advantages and disadvantages. They may not face the prejudice that a child with Down's Syndrome faces but often they are labeled as lazy, uncooperative and badly behaved as their difficulties are not visibly obvious. They may not get the support they require as their disorder has not been appropriately assessed and identified.

Often approaches are used to address the visible behaviour and academic difficulty rather than the underlying neuro-physiology that the child struggles with. These children are very often misunderstood, mislabeled and badly managed. Gifted children may need individual academic plans which not many schools will offer. They may also have a sensory processing disorder which can prevent them accessing the curriculum as they may have difficulties with attention and concentration, handwriting etc. Children who are gifted may present with emotional difficulties. They may struggle to fit the social norms. A child who was unable to read from grade 1 had extra reading for 6 years- he still could not read well. At age 11 he was unable to get a place in high school due to his poor reading ability. His primary school told his father that he was a 'slow learner'. The psychologist assessed his IQ for which he scored in the 'gifted range'. The occupational therapy assessment identified that he could not co-ordinate both sides of his body by

doing jumping jacks. This indicates he cannot integrate information across the 2 hemispheres a requirement for reading.

The majority of Private Schools here in the UAE don't provide appropriate programmes for these children with sensory integration and processing disorders. The worst scenarios are schools that accept children with learning difficulties but don't have the skilled staff or resources to meet their needs. In some cases the schools are looking to increase their population and when that population target has been achieved children who are not coping in that school environment are asked to leave. The 11 year old above who could not read joined the learning development programme at BILD and within 6 months was starting to read. He had 3 sessions a week of occupational therapy using sensory integration therapy and after 6 months could read and transferred to a large mainstream school in the next academic year.

Children with neuro-physiological disorders range in severity and need. Some of these children could be in a regular classroom with additional support and combining a developmental approach with an academic approach. Children who present with any underlying developmental difficulty cannot be helped by more practice in handwriting or reading, for example. These children require a learning development programme alongside an adapted academic curriculum that is at their academic level. They require a programme to meet their needs at the 'just right challenge'. Children with diverse difficulties and abilities requiring a combined academic and developmental programme.

The question is, can these programmes be delivered and needs met by one teacher in one classroom with 24 children?

Children with learning difficulties do not always have access to private schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Of the many private schools in the UAE only a few have a learning support section, the rest will not accept children who present with any indication that they may find learning a challenge. The schools who have a learning support section address the child's academic delays. For Example if the child finds reading a challenge, the learning support teacher will practice and use a variety of reading programmes for example. A child with 'learning difficulties' will not succeed in school with an educational approach alone. Appropriate referrals are frequently not made to occupational therapists using sensory integration therapy and speech and language therapists and a child with learning difficulties does not get the support they need. Schools usually believe that an educational psychologist's assessment and report will explain a child's academic, behavioural and social difficulties in school.

The recommendations of these reports, often, vary alarmingly containing suggestions of what the parent and teacher can do to help this child and rarely a referral to an occupational therapist or a speech and language therapist. Parents and teachers are not equipped with the skills to help a child with special needs on their own. Parents and teachers play an important role as part of a multidisciplinary team(MDT) but need the support and leadership of occupational therapists and Speech and Language therapists who can provide successful intervention programmes.

Unfortunately, the psychologist's reports may identify the child's academic difficulties but it is then often filed away and the child continues to struggle in school. Medication may be recommended, however, but of itself does not solve the child's learning difficulties. It can be used as part of an overall programme for a short period of time. The story of a 16 year old boy on medication who was refusing to return to school to study for his 'A' levels may demonstrate this point. At age 7 years he had been assessed by several psychologists, diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and recommended Ritalin. He had not been recommended occupational therapy using a sensory integration approach which would have addressed his ADHD. This 16 year old young man was seeing a psychologist, a psychiatrist and was taking Prozac for depression and was refusing to return to school to do his 'A' levels.

The special needs child's ability to progress and succeed in class requires a multi-disciplinary team approach which increases that child's learning capabilities. How does a child learn is the focus of the MDT and the focus of the teacher is how do I teach this child. You cannot teach a child who is unable to learn. All children should have an equal opportunity to learn.

Multi-disciplinary Team Approach

A multi-disciplinary team assesses the child's capacity to learn and creates an individual learning plan for each child. Children with 'special needs' require a comprehensive assessment for the purpose of designing a programme to address and improve their ability to learn, their academic success and their overall wellbeing.

The multi-disciplinary team consists of professionally qualified and licensed educational/clinical psychologists, Occupational Therapists with Sensory Integration Certification, Speech and Language therapists, Nutritionist, Remedial reading specialist, Class Teacher and parents.

The ethos of a multi-disciplinary team is based on the knowledge that a child's learning capacity can be improved. This is based on the theory of neurological development of the Central Nervous System.

Neuro-physiology of Learning and Development

Improving a child's capacity to learn is possible because of the Central Nervous System's (CNS) plasticity. This is the foundation to development and learning. The ability to learn is dependant on the child's neural efficiency which is crucial to a child's ability to succeed in school and life. Unfortunately when a child is not successful at a task such as handwriting the common approach is to practice the task of handwriting. This has very little to no success and can even be detrimental as it is frustrating for the child and it reinforces their difficulties. This has a negative effect on the child's self esteem and enjoyment of the learning process. All children regardless of their developmental and academic abilities benefit from programmes designed to improve their development and learning capacity and achieve their inherent potential so that they can grow and participate in society. The children who do not fall within the norm category need programmes to meet their needs at the stage and ability at which they are at. It is of no benefit to the child, their family and society if children who do not fit the norm are

excluded from society. A government who does not address the sensory needs of its population are depleting the overall intellectual capacity of its population.

School Environment

Schools as they are currently designed are for providing children with academic programmes both the physical and human environment. For inclusion of children with disabilities to be successful in schools a major change in service delivery needs to be designed and implemented. Schools need to reduce the physical barriers of access for children in wheelchairs and provision of specialized equipment for the severely disabled.

Providing specialized programmes for children in different locations within the school would be beneficial with an overall sense of everyone being part of the school campus with integration being developed where and when it is possible. This is beneficial for families and siblings of children with disabilities as they are all part of the same school community. Professionals trained in assessing and providing developmental programmes for children with disabilities is essential. Training for existing teaching staff on managing differentiation within the classroom is important. Changing attitudes of staff and students to children with disabilities and preventing bullying. Training programmes for staff on the many aspects of child development and 'how children learn' and appreciating that it is possible to increase children's learning capacity and independence.

BILD's Learning Development Programme

It was as a result of children being asked to leave schools that BILD started a learning development programme 7 years ago for children with neuro-physiological sensory

processing disorders (Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD etc). The learning development programme starts with a multi-disciplinary screening of psychology, occupational therapy and speech and language. The screening assesses a child's academic levels, speech, language and listening skills ability and the sensorimotor development of the child along with parent and teacher questionnaires.

The programme is multidisciplinary and provides regular therapy programmes during the school week. The classroom size is for approx 10 students. The programmes available are Sensory Integration therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Counseling, Remedial reading programme, Social skills groups, the Alert programme and the Developmental reflex programme. The children's progress is continually re-evaluated and monitored. A research study was carried out over 2 years to record the progress made by the students on the programme. The objective of the learning Development program is to resolve children's learning difficulties, increase their learning capability and transfer them to large mainstream schools when they are able to access the curriculum.

This programme has a high ratio of staff to students, 90 students and 45 staff. It is short term and intense. It is also an increased cost than schooling only however it is cost effective as the child has shorter sessions with more frequency which means a child gets more input for the same cost.

There is a cost of not providing programmes to help children with sensory processing disorders. Some studies have shown that children who present with social and emotional

difficulties may have a sensory processing disorder as its root cause and people in young offenders' institutes and prisons also present with sensory processing disorders.

A society that does not address the sensory needs of its population is diminishing its overall intellectual capacity. A learning development programme should be available to all children who are finding the school environment challenging.

Equal opportunity by inclusion for all children will only be successful if there is a change in the school programmes and environment and an intense training programme for existing school staff and a need for including occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech therapists as an integral part of schools.

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