



**Inclusion of Special Needs Children in School Requires a New
Model of Education**

By

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The issue of including children with learning difficulties and special needs in mainstream schooling is currently under consideration by government departments in the UAE. This is not a new idea and like other countries which have tried before it won't be done easily. For more than 30 years there have been efforts by governments across the world to include children with learning difficulties and special needs into public and private schools but the process has shown to be an extremely difficult exercise and not always to the benefit of children.

In the United States, from the time of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, through to the reauthorisation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004, the struggle to successfully place children with disabilities in regular education classrooms has continued. In Britain, the landmark Warnock Report in 1978 suggested that pupils, regardless of their particular needs or learning disabilities, belong together with their same age in the educational mainstream. In 1981, the Education Act was the basis for a move towards integration of students of various learning disabilities into mainstream schooling. And, more recently, the Department for Education and Skills' publication, *Removing the Barriers to Achievement*, in 2004, proposed that the use of outside school professional services, early intervention, more teacher training and improved expectations would reduce educational disadvantages. (MacBeath, 2008)

While this story has been unfolding in other countries for a number of years, with the recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UAE Federal Law 29 of 2006, there is pressure on the UAE to make some determinations, especially in the context of its desire to increase the quality of education in the UAE. But how broadly should its efforts go and should private schools be forced to accept students regardless of ability, and disability? The process will not be easy and there are a number of important issues to be addressed if the process is to be successful.

The first and probably the most obvious issue is determining the requirements for the development of children identified as have learning difficulties or special needs. While it may appear that there is an identifiable range of difficulty for schools to consider, in reality, child developmental and dysfunctional conditions are not easily addressed in the same way. There is also the fact that some 15-20% of children in an average school have learning difficulties which need to be addressed. Once a child is identified as having a learning difficulty, it is improbable that a teacher alone will be able to help the child develop.

Leading on from the first issue, is the need to develop Individual Education Programmes (IEPs) for each child; a task that also requires teachers, occupational therapists, psychologists and speech therapists. Once a child is accepted into a mainstream school, there are then the issues of service provision: Is the child to be 'included' on a full or part-time basis? Who is going to teach them? Will he need extra teaching support? How much extra training will the teachers need? What should be done with behavioural problems? Following along, there are all the extra administration and educational problems of having to 'exclude' children for behavioural and communication issues. Understandably, all these issues are compounded when considered in the context of poor inner city areas, or other disadvantaged areas of a country.

In response to these many problems of administering inclusion, there have been numerous suggested changes to the way schools provide education and how teachers teach. There is the 'support teacher' model, and the 'multi-level instructional approach', there is 'differentiated instruction', and 'flexible learning environments', along with the many proposals on 'best practice' and how to do it better.

But the problem remains: The parents of children with learning difficulties and special needs may want to see their children in mainstream schooling while parents of bright children want their children to excel and go on to good universities, and the school has to try and accommodate both schemes. The problem is further exacerbated by the costs of inclusion and the fact that in both Britain and the United States funding for programmes and resources is limited and schools go short and thus children don't get the opportunities that they might need.

It is obvious that changes to education systems are necessary if special needs children are to be included into mainstream schooling. But the degree of change needed is greater than we perhaps realise. The inclusion of children with special needs as an integral part of mainstream schooling is a particular system model of education: it is of itself a paradigm of education. To introduce this paradigm into the historic and existing system of education, however, is problematic because it essentially requires two other paradigms to shift. Western education stands on the two fundamental paradigms of stratified education and achievement focused curriculum.

The school system is a stratified education structure based on a matrix of chronological age and ability: As a child gets older and shows they have ability, they are promoted up a year grade in an A, B, C or D stream of study difficulty. This structure in recognising the natural development of children, promotes children along a chronological age differential in line with test results of student's reasoning capabilities.

Closely associated with the paradigm of stratification is the paradigm of achievement focused curriculum. School curricula recognise that there is a level of ability to be addressed in any age group of students. The objective, however, is to keep children progressing in their abilities and knowledge across the school year and to identify high ability students through testing competency and rewarding the most successful with higher grade marks.

To introduce a third paradigm of inclusion where children need extra support or different teaching, but are to be included in regular classes to learn under a regular curriculum is going to cause, and has caused, major problems. The task has emerged as seemingly impossible with much trouble caused by forcing children into 'unsuitable' systems of education. First there was this approach, then that approach and now the truth is unpleasant: lack of funds, exclusion of students, poor education outcomes and an overworked school middle management.

Current debates and efforts to confront the status quo of education and bring about change could be superfluous, however, as two other models of education are emerging: home schooling and community college style schooling.

While education departments might struggle with the philosophy of education and the lack of resources for inclusion, children across the world, regardless of the special or exceptional needs, are going on to the internet. In 2009, there were 55 million children in primary and high school in the United States. Seventy five percent of these children between age 3 and 17 use the internet to complete assessments. And, in addition to the many additional home schooling supplementary programmes available, there are another 1 million children doing purely home schooling with most of this from the internet. In Britain, over 25% of internet users use the internet for formalised education. The internet, by the way, doesn't care what a person looks like or indeed, if you seem as dysfunctional as Steven Hawkins. If you can operate, and even if you can't operate, a keyboard, you can learn. Schooling is going home.

At the same time, although not at the same rate, there are emerging options for child education that are more career focused than general education. This is the model of community college education where students get to choose subjects of interest and ability across a broader spectrum of subjects than are on offer in most schools. As the 21st Century continues to spin open there will be four areas of vocational education that will come to dominate schooling, especially university education, in response to growing employment and commercial growth: Business Studies (marketing, management, finance), Communication (music, performance, writing), Media (technical production in TV, radio, film, print matter) and IT (engineering, programming, communication). As new education and career options emerge, so there are new opportunities for children, special needs or not.

Developing nations should not be in a hurry to buy into someone else's problems in education. As Singapore has known for some time, education is going to ride on the back of developing internet technology and communication. The future in education and the wave of change to education opportunities taking place is going to run along behind developments in information delivery systems. In developing programmes for special needs education, school authorities should be looking at the broader picture of the development of their country and the emerging opportunities in education, for all. Private education courses, professional learning difficulties assessments and therapy, internet schooling and vocational directed education are all options to help inclusion, and variations of it, be more affordable and more realistic.

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