

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Frank A. Mallia

“Inclusion is an antidote to racism and sexism because it welcomes differences and celebrates them as capacities rather than deficiencies”



FRANK MALLIA
(Education Officer).
Taught in Primary and Special Schools. Pursued further studies at the University of Malta in Special Educational Needs and Educational Management and Administration. Author of articles on Special Education. A member of the MUT council for the past 26 years.

The education of children with special needs has for the past years been an on-going discussion. It has also been a bone of contention between those who maintain that these children should be sent to special schools and others who advise that these children should receive their education in a mainstream setting. Both parties forward valid arguments to substantiate their theories but although, as it is usual in cases like this, that no one method rules out the other, the case for inclusion is stronger and more acceptable.

What are special needs? Who decides whether these needs are special? To what degree should support be given? Who is responsible, the Health Department or the Education Division? These are questions which crop up but they will be discussed in a separate article.

The case for the integration of children with disabilities in the mainstream was strengthened in 1978 with the publication of the Warnock Report. This Report recommended that children with disabilities be integrated in mainstream settings. It was argued that these children had more to gain in a mainstream setting and that a new role was to be defined for special schools. The Special School would serve as a Resource and Support Centre and at the same time cater for those cases who either could not assimilate the transition from a special to a normal setting or else will serve those children who would benefit more from a sheltered environment than in the mainstream.

Inclusion

Since that report, the vision of integration has developed into a more wide-ranging set-up, namely that of inclusion. What is inclusion? The Center for Integrated Education and Community of Toronto Canada has defined the word in its journal *Inclusion News* as follows:

“Inclusion means inclusion. It means affiliation, combination ... Inclusion does not mean we are the same. Inclusion does not mean we all agree. Rather inclusion celebrates our diversity and difference with respect and gratitude. Inclusion is an antidote to racism and sexism because it welcomes these differences and celebrates them as capacities rather than deficiencies ... Inclusion means all together supporting one another.” (C.I.E.C. 1992. 1-4).

Whilst inclusion does not only refer to an

educational set-up and people with different needs, it does not always necessarily mean those whom we used to term as handicapped. For the purpose of this article I am referring to educational settings and children with disabilities. The three major conditions needed for inclusion to succeed are:

1. Acceptance.
2. Accessibility.
3. Support.

Both the Education Division and the Malta Union of Teachers are facing problems with the inclusion exercise mainly through the absence of one or more of these conditions. For the past fifteen years there has been a campaign of awareness for these children to be accepted as being the natural offspring of a society to which you and I belong. On the other hand from time immemorial, these children were either killed, died in their thousands of natural causes, were segregated and confined to institutions and when an attempt was made to educate them, they were sent to special schools. All these factors have created a culture of non-acceptance from society in general. Teachers being no exception were also victims of this philosophy, so much so that children in ordinary schools were threatened that they would be sent to special schools (skejjel tal-boloh) if they did not behave. People were and still are ready to fork out money but they were and many still are unable to accept them as part of everyday life. No form of legislation can generate acceptance.

Acceptance

Acceptance is the mainstay of inclusion because it is through acceptance that one can move to the next step i.e. accessibility. Once a person is accepted as he is, when one is mature enough to look for potential that can be developed further and not only try to pin-point defects, then one will be on the right track and will start looking for things which can help disabled children face fewer problems.

Some years ago we suddenly woke up to make some of our schools and public places accessible to these people. Ramps were installed to eliminate steps. It was a pity that many of the ramps installed were more dangerous than the steps due to their gradient. As if ramps were to be the ultimate solution!

What about toilet facilities? Should not our schools be equipped with such a facility? What about ordering new furniture with rounded edges? What about non-slip areas in playgrounds? Not only do all these things and others enhance accessibility for the disabled, but they also provide a higher margin of safety for normal children. The important thing is to plan carefully, ask for professional advice, shop around and act.

The third condition is support. This condition is also a sine-qua-non for the

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inclusion project. Any teacher with the best of intentions, goodwill and training will still find it difficult to cope on his own without support. A teacher working with children with special needs in inclusive settings needs support from both inside and outside agencies. This support needs to be school-based and there when you need it. It is a pity that we have not yet adopted the SENCO style of support which is used in the U.K. The Special Needs coordinator in a school is the person who will co-ordinate all the varying needs of the pupils in a school. He/she is the one who prepares the individual education plan for each child with special needs. If the child is supported by a Kindergarten Assistant, he/she advises him/her on how to go about it and follow the child's progress from time to time. If on the other hand this child has no special support, he/she helps the teacher work out the educational plan with the child. He/she is not tied down to a particular class but is at the disposition of all teachers who need help.

Resources

Being also a teacher he/she does not give up teaching but devotes a number of hours per week teaching through withdrawal or in-class support the more difficult cases. A resource room is needed for this purpose and it must contain suitable aids and resources to make the project a success. If our present support teachers are trained further in Special Needs they could perhaps be our future SENCOS. This position could also perhaps appeal to teachers in Special Schools who may find themselves redundant due to dwindling numbers in those schools. Naturally, the logistical side of the project will have to be discussed in a different forum, but one should give the idea further thought as the person concerned will be an accessible point of reference for the teachers in a particular school.

Another point which I feel is causing uneasiness in our schools is when a child with special needs is sent home when his KGA support is absent. Whilst it is wise to study each particular case on its own merits, one must come up with tangible and economical alternatives which should satisfy both the school and parents: “Every local education authority should restructure and if necessary supplement its existing advisory staff and resources to provide effective advice and support to teachers concerned with children with special educational needs through a unified service.” (Warnock Report 1978. Para. 13.3)

A study of the present support provision is to be made and evaluated. One to one support is to be given only where needed.

If after this exercise, some personnel will be found to be redundant, they should be strategically deployed in schools ready to take over in the event of absences in other schools.

Alternatively the Division could employ supply KGA's who will be on duty when required. Again these will be strategically enrolled to avoid unnecessary hardship both for the child and for the employee.

Lack of experience and expertise will be offset by the presence of the SENCO who will be briefing the KGA on her duties and helping her during her work.

One should also emphasize the importance of peripatetic teachers in the education process. Visits by these teachers are few and far between. Moreover teachers have to remain in class while the peripatetic teacher is delivering the lesson. This keeps the primary school teacher in constant contact with his/her pupils, leaving little or no time to discuss pupils needs and behaviours with other personnel.

I suggest that the situation be remedied as quickly as possible for the benefit of our pupils. Organised and professional support helps avoid school and class disruption. There should be a harmonious working arrangement between the class teacher and support agencies as only through such an arrangement can the full benefits of support be reaped. Support should never be regarded as “having an extra pair of hands in the classroom but being valued as a professional colleague with distinctive skills, knowledge and expertise” (Riddell and Brown. *Special Educational Needs Policy in the 90's*. 1994).

For this to be achieved, collegiality has to be developed not only in the classroom but in the whole school, as these children are the responsibility of the whole school. As a last word, I cannot overemphasize the importance of working with parents. Parents are or at least should be an important asset in the education of children.

Some children have an unstable or disturbed home background which the school is duty bound to balance. On the other hand there are still children who enjoy stable family relationships and it is the duty of the teacher to exploit this resource. Some parents may make things difficult but in their majority they can be used as facilitators in the learning process of their children. They have to be guided and have things explained to them to keep them on the right track.

This will indirectly be helping the school that, instead of being blamed by parents for a particular problem, once these will start working with the school they will become more sympathetic and less critical of the situation.

“In all cases of parental involvement, the response from parents and children has been tremendous. All the myths about parents not being able to sustain interest have been thoroughly exploded... The best gain of all, however is the relationship that blossoms between parents and children, bringing deeper understanding which benefits the whole family.” (NARE Publication *Parents as Partners*. 1988)