

## **Embracing Diversity and Valuing Inclusion: Understanding and Responding to Learners' Diverse needs in Inclusive Classrooms**

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### ***Abstract***

*Understanding and responding to the children with diverse needs and abilities is a challenge and this needs an inclusive, learning-friendly environment. There are learners from different socio-economic, language, cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, ability groups etc. Diversity refers to the variations and differences found among people. These people are unique in their own way. An inclusive classroom welcomes, nurtures, and educates all children regardless of their gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other characteristics. For valuing inclusion, we need to embrace diversity. UNESCO views inclusion as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning.” Education through the inclusion lens is equipped and ready to handle diversity through flexible teaching and learning methods adapted to different needs and learning styles, reorienting teacher education, flexible curriculum responsive to diverse needs and not overloaded with academic content, welcoming of diversity, involvement of parents and the community, early identification and remediation of children at risk of failure. If teachers are not responsive to these diverse needs and provide the necessary support learners may experience barriers to learning. On the other hand, Children learn respect and to value each other's abilities, no matter what they are, as well as patience, tolerance, and understanding. They come to realize that each person is “special” and to embrace diversity and cherish it. This paper focuses on various ways of addressing all learners, with and without disabilities in the classroom.*

**Key Words:** Diversity, Inclusion, Inclusive Education.

“All children and young people of the world, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, with their hopes and expectations, have the right to education. It is not our education systems that have a right to certain types of children. Therefore, it is the school system of a country that must be adjusted to meet the needs of all children.”

- (B. Lindqvist, UN-Rapporteur, 1994)

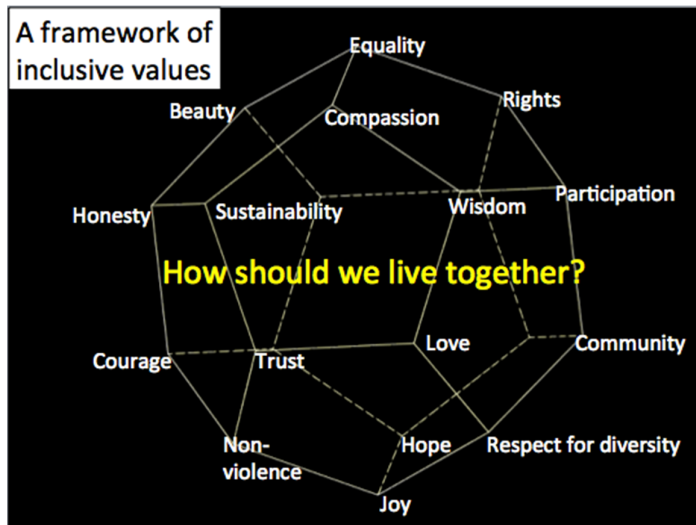
## **Introduction**

Every child is an individual and has unique needs. Inclusion welcomes all children regardless of any differences. These differences are not only accepted and respected in inclusion but it also rejoices the fact that no two human beings are the same or equal. It is a process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals. UNESCO (2005) views inclusion as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning”. Regardless of any barrier, Education must be viewed as a facilitator in everyone’s human development and functionality. An inclusive learning friendly environment is based upon shared vision and values which includes all children -from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, with special abilities or learning needs, those affected directly or indirectly by HIV/AIDS; etc. It is non-discriminatory, gender fair, culturally sensitive and celebrates differences, and stimulates learning for ALL children. It is safe and protects ALL children from harm, violence, and abuse. It promotes healthy lifestyles and life skills. It promotes participation, cooperation, caring, self-esteem, and confidence and also opportunities for teachers to learn and benefit from that learning. Teachers, families, communities are also involved in children’s learning which is also relevant to their daily lives. Inclusive Education recognises and responds to the diversity of the children’s needs and abilities – including differences in their ways and pace of learning. To achieve education for all, Schools with inclusive culture are the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes and create welcoming communities. These inclusive schools, “...must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. (UNESCO, 1994, framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p.11-12) . An inclusive learning environment where the learners are from different cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, socio-economic, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability groups etc. will help to develop their learning and abilities by responding to their diverse needs. Education through the lens of inclusion is equipped and ready to embrace diversity through flexible teaching and learning methods adapted to different needs and learning styles, flexible curriculum responsive and adaptable to diverse needs and not overloaded with academic content, reorienting teacher education, involvement of parents and the community, early identification and remediation of children at risk of failure.

## **Inclusive values**

To make everyone feel that he or she ‘belongs’ to the class equal valuing of students – ‘equal rights, entitlement, needs’ it is important to accept everyone. Booth (2011) describes values as fundamental guides that give a sense of direction and underpin actions towards others. With the commitment to overcome exclusion and promote participation, inclusive values must be put in action. Inclusive education values diversity and recognizes that students learn in different ways and consider it as an asset and resource to education. It is based upon a belief in equality, human rights and democracy for all learners. The Council of the European Union (2009) stresses that: ‘Education should promote intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights and the environment, as well as combat all forms of

discrimination, equipping all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds' (p. 3)



Source:[www.indexforinclusion.org/avaluesframework.php](http://www.indexforinclusion.org/avaluesframework.php)

Some indicators of Inclusive Values are

- Valuing all children
- Recognizing diversity as a valuable resource for development
- Expecting each child to participate and contribute
- Having high expectations from all children
- Teachers, children, parents, community members – all share philosophy of inclusion
- Children and teachers treating each other with respect
- Teachers seeking to remove barriers in learning
- Children participating in all activities of schools
- Schools striving to minimize discriminatory practices
- Developing values describing needs of each child being responded to

### **Diversity and Inclusive Education**

Each individual is unique. Diversity refers to *all* of the ways in which people are distinct and unique. It refers to the variations and differences found among people. These people are unique in their own way. Race, ethnicity, language, cultural, religious, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, ability grouping, beliefs or ideologies are the dimension of diversity. It is a resource rather than a deficit. The notion of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It contributes to the expansion of talent pool and creativity that fosters the development of new, innovative approaches by the teachers to respond to the diverse needs. It is the responsibility of teachers to ensure that all children participate fully in society and that they have equality of opportunity in education.

Every student learns in different ways. The individual differences must not be seen as a problem, rather an enriching environment must be provided to meet the needs of all children. The teachers need to be diversity conscious, develop awareness, understanding, and a range of skills, unique experiences, strengths, and ideas in the area of diversity in an inclusive classroom. Diversity should be appreciated and celebrated by respecting and recognising diverse needs. On the other hand, Children learn to respect and value the differences among each other. They come to realize that each person is “special” and to embrace diversity and cherish it.

UNESCO (2001) views Inclusive Education as follows

- acknowledges that all children can learn and that all need some form of support in learning;
- aims to uncover and minimise barriers to learning;
- is broader than formal schooling and includes the home, the community and other opportunities for education outside of schools;
- is about changing attitudes, behaviours, curricula and environments, teaching methods to meet the needs of all children;
- is a dynamic process which is constantly evolving to promote an inclusive society according to local cultures and contexts and is part of the wider strategy.

An inclusive classroom welcomes, nurtures, and educates all children regardless of their gender and characteristics such as physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic. Only mixing of students with diverse needs in a classroom will not value inclusion. Increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion from and within education calls for changes to accommodate, provide for & support diverse needs and changes/adaptations in attitudes, values, language, content, approaches, structures, and strategies which will help in accommodating more and more students in inclusive culture.

### **Responding to Learners Diverse Needs in Classrooms**

“Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.” (Salamanca Statement, Art.2, 1994). Understanding and responding to the children with diverse needs and abilities is a challenging task and this needs an inclusive, learning-friendly environment. Negative attitudes are one of the biggest obstacles to inclusion. Also, parents may be concerned about ‘lowering the standards’ if children with disabilities and other special needs are included in ordinary classrooms. To ensure that teaching is directed at helping the children to learn, teachers must identify and assess the needs of the learners and remove the barriers to learning, development and participation. These may include environmental, attitudinal and individual barriers.

School curriculum must be flexible and responsive to diverse needs and not overloaded with academic content and based upon principles of universal design for learning (UDL) that will enable children to learn, develop, and participate. It will help in creating a more inclusive and

learning-friendly environment in the school. Orkwis & McLane, 1998 mentioned three principles of UDL

- Providing Multiple Means of Representation- visual, graphic, auditory, for example- so that all students have diverse ways to access information.;
- Providing Multiple Means of Action and expression-providing students with many opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned;
- Providing Multiple Means of Engagement- providing a variety of ways to involve students in learning as cited in Kurtts, S. A. (2006)

Inclusive pedagogic strategies such as Cooperative Learning strategies in the classroom, Peer tutoring, Social Learning, Buddy system, reflective teaching, and Multisensory teaching must be used to respond to the diverse needs. It emphasizes on providing opportunities for equal participation and enrichment of the learning environment making both teachers and learners feel comfortable with diversity. In order to reach out to all children , to develop every child's potential and learn to accept each other's differences and respect and value each other equally, learn to live together and support each other, inclusive education plays a vital role. It also helps the teachers in becoming more skilful and better practitioners.

Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms -A Guide for Teachers, UNESCO (2001) specifies nine golden rules for dealing with diversity found among any class of children but especially if some of the children have special needs .They are - Including every one, clear communication b/w teachers and students, managing classrooms, effective lesson planning, plans for individual(IEP), giving individual help, using assistive devices and TLM suited for various learning styles, managing behaviour ,working together.

Tools for Teachers: Curriculum Modifications & Adaptations enumerates nine types of Adaptations are given by ways-input, output, time, difficulty, level of support, size, degree of participation, alternate goals, and substitute curriculum. Various curriculum adaptations in classroom and school environment, school subjects, teaching strategies, evaluation procedures will help in responding to variety of learners with different learning styles. Apart from writing examination papers, various approaches for continuous assessment through portfolios, project work, direct observation, functional assessment, student's self assessment must also be used to test the pupil's competence.

A study of European teachers' perceptions on responding to diversity investigated by the 3 year (2004-07) Comenius 2.1 Project, DTM(P): Differentiated Teaching Module (Primary): Preparing teachers to respond to student diversity in primary education revealed that there is a need for caring and inclusive attitudes and school ethos, to develop inclusive and solidarity values, for building collaborative networks, to organize responsive teaching, to face challenges to responding to diversity (Humphrey et al., 2006, p.310).

Teachers' development in understanding and enhancing their response to students diversity; Creating inclusive and child centred schools and classrooms ; building together a caring and supportive learning community by adopting a holistic attitude to human development and

education; understanding responding to the diversity by adopting constructivist approach to teaching and learning for their active participation; diversifying the curriculum- content, process and product (Tomlinson (2001) and UNESCO (2004)); planning, implementation and evaluation of responsive and inclusive teaching strategies in the classroom are various ways to respond and benefit all pupils , not just those with ‘special needs’.

## Conclusion

This paper focussed on valuing inclusion by adopting more inclusive ways of thinking as discrimination continues to pervade schools and educational systems which is a matter of deep concern. We – teachers, children, parents, community members must all must share the philosophy of inclusion and accept the fact that “All Children Are Different”, no matter what their background and ability is, they must have an equal right to education. In order to manage the differences among our children, we must recognize their strengths and weaknesses develop flexible structures that facilitate responding to the diversity and increasing the level of participation by providing diverse opportunities for practice and performance that help us provide a good quality education for all children .We must embrace diversity and cherish it.

*Accept Differences...Celebrate Diversity...*

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