DIFFERENTLY
TOGETHER
INCLUSION IN EDUCATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The State of the Education Report for India 2019: Children with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2019) states that nearly 8 million children of school-going age in India have disabilities. As we know, school years are critical years in a child’s development and the school environment plays a pivotal role in shaping a child’s growth and outcomes. Yet, three-fourths of children with disabilities at the age of 5 years and one-fourth between 5-19 years do not go to any educational institution. The number of children enrolled in school drops significantly with each successive level of schooling. Children with disabilities are overrepresented in the population of children who are out of school and not in the education system.

Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of life at school.

Inclusive education is both a process and an outcome. The process involves creating school policy, building staff capacity and creating a culture that makes it possible for every student to learn. The outcome is students with disabilities being able to learn academically and enjoy social aspects of life at school.

In low- and middle-income countries like India, investing in inclusive education is an essential pathway to improving outcomes for children with disabilities. Research shows that most students, both with and without disabilities, learn and perform better when they are in an inclusive school.
Ummeed, meaning ‘hope’, was founded in 2001 as a not-for-profit organization, with the vision of helping children with developmental disabilities reach their full potential and be included in society. Ummeed works directly with children and their families through therapy and one-to-one sessions and has expanded its work into areas of training, research and advocacy.

The School Outreach Team (SOT) at Ummeed has been working to bring the critical issue of inclusive education from the relatively narrow disability rights space to the mainstream education space. The team works on spreading awareness, building sensitivity and resources to bridge the gap, and creating inclusive ideas and practices which are more accepting of diversity (more specifically for children with special needs) so as to create safe spaces for children to reach their maximum learning potential in both academic and social arenas. The team has trained teachers and professionals from more than 350 schools across India through long-term engagements, sensitization and skill-building workshops and have worked in depth with around 20 education-related NGOs to influence and reach out to a larger number of stakeholders.

**PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT**

Ummeed’s intention of working on this document is to build awareness about the need to include children with disability in a large number of schools. We hope to encourage schools to proactively give admission to children with disabilities, make a beginning in addressing gaps in how they are included academically and socially, and improve the quality of education they receive.

Various inclusive practices observed by us in a range of schools (government schools, private schools and public private partnerships) across India have been included in this document. We hope that reading about the best practices in schools that are similar in context to their own will inspire all stakeholders including the school management, principal, teachers, policy makers, other educators, parents and students, to match it to their needs and implement such practices.

**METHODOLOGY**

Our team visited around 20 inclusive schools from across India to gather information about their inclusive practices. Additionally, we included practices from 5 schools that we have been working with closely. Our approach was to gather as many concrete examples of practices as possible, thus making their access and implementation available to all stakeholders.
The Indian education system is fraught with systemic issues that make it challenging to practice inclusion. Yet we found many schools in India that have tried to create an inclusive culture and follow inclusive policies and practices. While there is no one ‘perfect school’, we have described a range of practices in the schools we observed, that speak of the strengths of these schools. We understand that this is by no means a complete list, and hope that this will be a living document, with additions over time.

Inclusive practices in this document have been divided into four broad domains:

- **Leadership and Policy**
  - a) The creation of an ‘Inclusion Committee’ that has ownership and accountability for inclusion in the school. The committee comprises board representatives, teachers and student and parent representatives. Ongoing discussion, implementation and monitoring of inclusive practices has led to a continuous commitment towards making the school an inclusive space.
  - b) Many schools have clearly articulated admission policies which focus on the fact that there will be no screening tests or interviews for the admission of a child. Admissions are made by zip code or by lottery. This is an important step towards making the school more inclusive.
  - c) Recruitment of specialised staff like special educators, counsellors and occupational therapists to support children with disabilities is an important step towards making the school an inclusive space.

- **Inclusive School Culture**

- **Multi-tiered Support**

- **Family and Community Engagement**

Each domain includes relevant practices with examples from schools which can be used by specific stakeholders.
Academically at the school level, designing a curriculum which is inclusive in nature has been a priority for many schools. Music, sports, art, dance are not considered as extra-curricular subjects but as much a part of the main curriculum as any other subject which is considered mainstream. The purpose has been to provide opportunities to children to experience success and practice leadership in different areas, amongst their peers.

At the classroom level, many schools have opted for planning the lessons jointly with special educators, for students who need additional support. Moreover, creation of differentiated lesson plans and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners has been a priority.

Creating spaces for students to work in smaller groups to encourage peer learning and peer support has been the highlight both at the academic and social level for many schools who want to encourage and promote inclusion. Students with diverse needs get opportunities to take on different responsibilities as well as learn from their peers (which has been found to be an effective way to learn for both students with and without disabilities).

Schools have been conducting demystification sessions about disability to sensitize students by making them more aware and supportive of differences amongst each other.

Circle time has been successful for a lot of inclusive schools. It creates a safe space for children to be themselves, to express their feelings and share their thoughts. A range of educators have shared their observations that circle time develops mutual respect as well as social and emotional skills in students with diverse needs.
thoughts. A range of educators have shared their observations that circle time develops mutual respect as well as social and emotional skills in students with diverse needs.

### FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Schools understand the value of involving and sharing responsibility with families and communities to sustain inclusion within and outside schools. Many schools have collaborated with families to create an environment of inclusion for students.

a) Some schools have created platforms like spending a day at school for families to understand and engage in the process of inclusive education within the school. These opportunities give them a chance to observe, share their thoughts, and get a better understanding of the school’s philosophy and culture. It helps families understand how they and their child are a part of this system.

b) Some schools have formed support groups for the families of students with disabilities. This offers a safe space for these families. Often they invite families of students without disabilities to this group which creates a sense of community and belonging.

### CONCLUSION

We hope that different stakeholders in mainstream schools will be able to identify, contextualize and implement some inclusive practices from this document, to make their own school and classroom a safe space and more inclusive for all children, but especially for children with disabilities who are the most vulnerable.

This document is meant to be the starting point of a process which can lead to positive systemic change in the long run. In the short term, we hope that by instituting and adopting some of these practices many students with disabilities and their families (and their educators) will gain a sense of confidence, and feel empowered to make a change in their educational experience.
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
HOW BIG IS THE ISSUE?
About 15 percent of the world's population lives with some form of disability (World Report on Disability, 2011; Disability Inclusion Statement, 2020). Globally, 52.9 million children younger than 5 years had developmental disabilities in 2016. According to The Lancet Global Health, about 95 percent of these children live in low-income and middle-income countries (Olusanya, Davis, Wertlieb, Boo, Nair et al, 2018).

While official statistics suggest that the prevalence of disability in India is at 2.2 percent (Census of India, 2011), it is a well-known fact that the prevalence of a disability depends on how it is measured. More recent reports from India looking specifically at childhood disability suggest that the prevalence of neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) were at 9.2 percent and 13.6 percent in children of 2–<6 and 6–9–year age categories respectively, without significant difference according to gender, rural/urban residence, or religion and almost one-fifth of these children had more than one NDD. Based on these estimates nearly 8 million children in the school-going age-group (aged under 19) in India, have disabilities (UNESCO, 2019).

There is a large body of research in low- and middle-income countries, which demonstrates that investing in the development of children early, including children with disabilities, leads to better outcomes – they have better physical and mental health – and are able to earn more as adults (Gertler and Heckman, 2014).

Most research on inclusive education for children with special needs so far, focuses on stating the problem of inclusion in mainstream settings, understanding the challenges and barriers related to inclusion and identifying the gaps that need to be addressed. Little focus has however been given to what can be done to address these gaps.

Ummeed uses a strengths-based approach to work with children with disabilities and their families. In this document we use the same approach to identify inclusive practices in a few schools in India that demonstrate what is possible in the existing education system.
When 40 percent of Grade 4 to 5 children can’t read at a Grade 2 level, why is it important to have inclusive education?

- Because over a quarter of those children have a disability (this is a conservative estimate, and actual numbers might be higher due to limitations of the INCLEN study published in 2018).
- The line between nature and nurture is blurred – does a child have reading failure because he has dyslexia which is a genetic condition or is it because he is not exposed to books and language due to poverty? It may be impossible to tell in some instances, but fortunately the interventions may overlap (NICHD, 2006). In an ideal scenario, an inclusive education system addresses the needs of not just students with disabilities but all vulnerable children.
- All children, including those with disabilities, have the right to learn in the least restrictive environment [UNCRPD ratified by India and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act]. Schools should and can provide this environment.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides that children with disabilities should not be discriminated against and also that they should be able to participate in the general education system. Moreover, India’s RTE Act, 2009, mandates free and compulsory elementary education to all children including CWSN (Children with Special Needs). This act provides a legal framework that entitles all children between the ages of 6-14 years free and compulsory admission, attendance and completion of elementary education.

We want to call out here that inclusion is much more than helping children with disabilities learn in the classroom. It includes addressing bullying, exclusion and the consequent mental health concerns that children with disabilities face in school.

Inclusion is both a process – and an outcome – of achieving social justice and equity in society by understanding, accepting and valuing differences among today’s school children and youth (SSA, 2011). It is more significant than the mere enrolment of children with special needs and mental health concerns in regular classrooms, and it acknowledges that a child’s academic potential cannot be developed separately from her/his social, emotional and physical potential, as these are interdependent aspects of a child’s development.
Multiple systematic reviews of scholarly research literature indicate that students with disabilities who were educated in general education classes academically outperformed their peers who had been educated in segregated settings (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Katz & Mirenda, 2002).

There is also evidence that participating in inclusive settings can yield social and emotional benefits for students with disabilities. Such social and emotional benefits can include forming and maintaining positive peer relationships, which have important implications for a child’s learning and psychological development. A 2002 review of the scholarly literature indicates that students with developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms demonstrated higher levels of engaged behaviour than students with developmental disabilities in special education classrooms (Katz & Mirenda, 2002).

There is a myth that inclusion in schools will take away teaching time, support and other resources from students without disabilities. Ruijs & Peetsma (2009) found that inclusion was generally associated with either positive or neutral effects on academic outcomes for non-disabled students. In an inclusive classroom, teachers employ strategies and teaching techniques which meet the needs of diverse learners (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). A literature review study by Staub and Peck (1995) describes five benefits of inclusion for non-disabled students: reduced fear of human differences accompanied by increased comfort and awareness (less fear of people who look or behave differently); growth in social cognition (increased tolerance of others, more effective communication with all peers); improvements in self-concept (increased self-esteem, perceived status and a sense of belonging); development of personal moral and ethical principles (less prejudice, higher responsiveness to the needs of others); and warm and caring friendships.
Ummeed, meaning ‘hope’, was founded in 2001 as a not-for-profit organization, with the vision of helping children with developmental disabilities reach their full potential and be included in society.

Over the 19 years of Ummeed’s journey, its transdisciplinary team of developmental paediatricians, occupational therapists, mental health professionals, autism intervention specialists, special educators, speech therapists and social workers have directly worked with over 10,000 children and their families, providing support through over 75,000 sessions.

Ummeed has also moved into areas of training, research and advocacy.

The SOT has been working to bring the critical issue of inclusive education from the relatively narrow disability rights space to the mainstream education space. The team has been creating awareness and building sensitivity, sharing resources to bridge the gap, creating inclusive ideas and practices which are more accepting of diversity (more specifically for children with special needs) so as to create safe spaces for children to reach their maximum learning potential in both academic and social arenas.

Ummeed’s intention of working on this document is to build awareness about the need to include children with disabilities in a large number of schools. We hope to encourage schools to proactively give admission to children with disabilities, make a beginning in addressing gaps in how they are included academically and socially, and improve the quality of education they receive.

Various inclusive practices observed by us in a range of schools (government schools, private schools and public private partnerships) across India have been included in
Ummeed’s intention of working on this document is to build awareness about the need to include children with disabilities in a large number of schools. We hope to encourage schools to proactively give admission to children with disabilities, make a beginning in addressing gaps in how they are included academically and socially, and improve the quality of education they receive.

Various inclusive practices observed by us in a range of schools (government schools, private schools and public private partnerships) across India have been included in this document. We hope that reading about the best practices in schools that are similar in context to their own will inspire all stakeholders including the school management, principal, teachers, policy makers, other educators, parents and students, to match it to their needs and implement such practices.

Who can use this document?

- School management interested in making their schools more inclusive for children with disabilities.
- Teachers who want to create an inclusive culture in their classroom and need examples of inclusive practices which they can bring into their classroom.
- Policy makers and educational leadership, who are interested in developing school and system-level policies that are inclusive and supportive of children with diverse needs.
- Parents and students with and without disabilities who want to create a school culture that is supportive of students with disabilities.

This list of inclusive practices is just a sampling and is not comprehensive which is why we hope this will generate discussion and together with the above stakeholders we will continue to add to the list of inclusive practices to this living document.
In order to compile this document, we visited around 20 schools in different cities (as depicted in the map below) across India. These schools were referred to us by various stakeholders (educators, teachers, parents, therapists, etc.) as those that were known to use inclusive practices in order to engage children with special needs within their school system.

Along with that, we have included inclusive practices from 5 schools that we have been working with closely. These schools are located mainly in Mumbai, Pune and Ahmedabad. Our approach was to gather as many concrete examples of practices as possible, thus making their access and implementation available to all stakeholders.

PRIOR TO SETTING UP A VISIT TO THE SCHOOL:
Ummeed engaged in conversations with senior management from these schools to explain the nature and purpose of our visit.

WHILE AT THE SCHOOL OUR VISIT INCLUDED:
- Meetings with the senior management/principal – to get an understanding of how the management views inclusion, how the school came about to introducing inclusive practices and their thoughts around engaging with children with special needs in the mainstream school system.
• Meetings with some teachers and the special resource team (which typically included special educators, mental health therapists and sometimes other therapists such as occupational and/or speech therapists) – to understand how they feel about inclusion and how they go about implementing inclusive practices.
• Classroom observations – to see how inclusive practices are actually being implemented.
• Meetings with parents where possible – to understand from their perspective how they feel about the process of inclusion in the schools to which their children go.

POST THE SCHOOL VISIT:
All the data was collated and analysed to identify emerging themes, and shared with the schools to corroborate.
The practices in this document have been divided based on a framework used by the ‘Swift Education Center’ (guide.swiftschools.org). We have not included all the domains from the Swift framework and have added the domain of Inclusive School Culture in our approach. This document is broadly divided into four domains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOMAINS</th>
<th>WHAT IT IS</th>
<th>WHY IT IS IMPORTANT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Policy</td>
<td>Strong and actively engaged leaders who believe in inclusion and are committed to improving inclusive policies and practices within a system that empowers educators and school personnel. These leaders regularly review aspects of inclusive education within the system and include different stakeholders in the process.</td>
<td>The leadership is central to facilitating systemic change and leading faculty to adopt new attitudes and new practices and to provide support and resources required to create an inclusive environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive School Culture</td>
<td>An inclusive culture starts from the premise that everyone in the school – students, educators, administrators, support staff and parents – should feel that they belong, can realize their potential and contribute to the life of the school. A real culture of inclusion cannot be brought about unless everyone embraces it. In an inclusive school, inclusive policies and practices are adopted and reinforced consistently to bring in a long-term shift in the attitudes.</td>
<td>Schools act as mirrors of the larger community, there is a great opportunity to teach students, early in their development as citizens, about the importance and value of inclusion. They will learn behaviour that will ultimately help nurture truly inclusive communities. It also provides an opportunity for parents to learn through their children about the importance of belonging, acceptance and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOMAINS</td>
<td>WHAT IT IS</td>
<td>WHY IT IS IMPORTANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multi-tiered Support</strong></td>
<td>Academic and behavioural/social support is provided to students at different levels – school wide, class wide and at an individual level. Academic support includes being inclusive while designing the curriculum, planning and at pedagogy. Behavioural/social inclusion means students are <strong>accepted for who they are</strong> and support is provided by <strong>creating spaces</strong> where all students feel inclusive and where their needs are met.</td>
<td>A multi-tiered system of support allows every level of the school’s functioning to be aligned with the academic and behavioural expectations of the students. It helps the school organise resources in a way that staff and students get consistent messages, and inclusive practices are practiced by all and sustained over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family and Community Engagement</strong></td>
<td>When families, community members and schools form partnerships in which <strong>each benefits from and supports</strong> the other, the local culture supports and sustains equity and inclusion within the school’s multi-tiered support system.</td>
<td>Raising the next generation is a shared responsibility. When families, communities and schools work together, students are more successful and the entire community benefits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An inclusion committee is set up within the board and it includes a dedicated representative from the board. It also includes other stakeholders such as teacher, student and parent representatives, who bring in their ideas and observations and incorporate inclusive practices within the school premises.

An integral part of the role of the leadership in schools that promote inclusion, is the recruitment of special educators, counsellors and occupational therapists to support the inclusion committee and children with disabilities.
As per the Right to Education Act, 2009, all private unaided recognized schools must reserve 25 percent of the seats for EWS/DGs (economically weaker section/disadvantaged group) and children with disabilities while admitting children at the pre-school, pre-primary and/or Class I level.

In the schools we visited and worked with, many had a clearly articulated admission policy that was based on no criteria other than the proximity of the family’s residence. No screening tests or interviews are conducted and all children are welcomed. This is especially true in New Delhi where it is a legal requirement to remove all admission criteria for entry-level classes as per the Directorate of Education, New Delhi.

Bombay International School (BIS), founded in 1962 in Mumbai, is a parent cooperative run Cambridge International School in Mumbai and follows this approach at the management level for encouraging inclusion in the school. BIS envisions academic excellence through ongoing diversity, equity and inclusion and aims for every child and adult to have a voice. Due to the ongoing commitment to equity and inclusion, it was decided to form an inclusion committee in the school. In January 2019, the school appointed a head of inclusion to expand the team and create robust processes with the support of an expanded team of 4 special educators, 3 counsellors, 3 student aides and 2 remedial support teachers. The school firmly believes that inclusion benefits not just students with special needs, but also teaches the others values of care, compassion and empathy.
However, some schools based on their capacity to serve children with disabilities have a separate registration form for CWD (children with disabilities) and use a lottery system for admission (e.g. The Heritage School). We also observed that in some schools outside New Delhi, the registration form does not require the parents to disclose the presence of a diagnosed disability.

One such example, St. Mary’s School, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi founded in 1966 on the principles of inclusion, equality and fostering team spirit, has 10-12 percent of children with disabilities. The principal, Annie Koshi said, “We had a child in our school with a sibling who had cerebral palsy. She asked us if he could study here as well because they stayed close by, and we said, why not.” The child went on to complete his Class 12 and graduate from Delhi’s prestigious St Stephen’s College, the first disabled person to do so.

FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH NGOs WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Schools have set up partnerships/relationships with non-government organisations (NGOs) to get additional support and expertise in providing an inclusive and safe environment to children.

One such example is of Peepul, New Delhi (a non-profit that works in partnership with the government to raise the quality of education being provided in schools) which has collaborated with Children First and the project is called The Rainbow Project. Children First provides a detailed diagnostic report to the school for children with concerns identified by teachers from the primary classes. In order to spend time and understand the needs of each child, the school follows the policy of having one teacher teach the same set of students from one class for the entire year. No testing is done at this stage. Children First is approached once the teacher has diagnosed the needs of the child at the initial stage. Using the diagnosis, teachers and the special educator work out a need-based plan of action for each child.
In-service teacher training in the school every year includes capacity building to identify and support children with diverse needs in the classroom.

For example, through their teacher training program, Peepul, partnered with the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) to develop the foundational knowledge, skills and mindsets of teachers. It operated as a hands-on teacher training program that had a significant component of coaching and classroom observation. Their aim was to work towards meaningful teacher-student interaction that would engage each child in the learning process. It included different components like increasing engagements through lesson planning, classroom management, etc.

“Education for a differently abled child in regular schools is possible only if the school management makes it a policy matter. My child could happily go to a regular school as the management asserted to the teachers that they learn about my child’s difficulties and prepare themselves to teach her along with mainstream children. It worked wonders.”

Qaiser Shireen Sheikh, parent
The school's vision should focus on and clearly call out inclusion as a core value. For example, located in Mumbai, Khoj Community School’s (an Apni Shala initiative to create a space for high-quality education for children from low-income communities) vision is – *Khoj aims to become a model space for professional development and research set in Indian context for integrated curriculum and pedagogy for whole-school SEL (Socio-Emotional Learning) integration.*

The Heritage School, New Delhi’s vision is – A learning community where each is free to be and grow towards the realisation of their highest human potential through harmonious integration of spirit, heart, mind and body.
A school culture and environment that is inclusive of all students and has programs that discourage exclusion or discrimination on gender, sexuality, socio-economic status or any other criteria will more naturally be inclusive of students with disability. We saw examples of schools that had several programs that reinforce their philosophy of inclusion.

For example, St. Mary’s School, has set up the following:

- Anti-Bullying Committee
  Sensitizing everyone about bullying and its side effects is an effective way to work towards an inclusive and bullying-free school culture.
- Incorporated a SATH (Standing Against the Hate) Complaint Box
- Birthday Policy of ‘no expensive gifts’

Diversity, social acceptance, altruism, empathy, understanding – these are some of the benefits experienced by students, with and without disabilities, who learn in an inclusive setting or culture.

The purpose of creating such spaces is to encourage inclusion not only in classrooms but outside classrooms and for stakeholders from different verticals of the school system. For teachers to practice inclusion in classrooms, such practices are to be followed for the staff as well. Riverside School in Ahmedabad has come up with a no staff room approach and children can approach the teacher at any time. There is a common quiet room, which is a room with 2 tables and chairs and it is accessible to both staff and students. This promotes a non-hierarchical environment in the school.
The Orchid School, a CBSE school in Pune has a core committee which has representatives from the leadership team, teaching faculty (primary, middle and high school), support staff, IT, admin, etc. Every academic year, the staff is encouraged and asked to volunteer to be a part of the core committee, to voice their opinion in the decision-making. Regular meetings are conducted to discuss all the areas which affect the functioning of the school such as hiring, policy making, planning during the pandemic, etc. This encourages acceptance and inclusion of voices in the decision making process.

Additionally, the admin team at the Orchid School conducts language and computer classes for the support staff of the school. The Orchid School also has All Staff Retreats, the aim of which is for people from different departments to get to know each other well and spend quality time engaging in team building activities. The language of communication at the staff retreat is Hindi, which all support staff are familiar with.

Samait Shala, is an NGO in Ahmedabad that works towards creating an inclusive learning environment for children. Their approach is to collaborate and support schools to address the high learning gaps in the classroom by catering to children with diverse needs. To design 'in class' interventions for children with learning difficulties and disabilities, they begin their program and incorporate practices by working with the school head and the school leader and then transition to working with the department heads and teachers. This leads to inclusion among the staff and sustainability of practices.

Schools are vocal/articulate about the fact that they are inclusive by putting up visual reminders in the premises for all the stakeholders to see. For example, at the Godrej Udhyanchal School, Vikhroli, there are school wide messages in English and Hindi which convey their philosophy of inclusion with posters, images, quotes, etc. on corridors and classroom walls.

Schools are inclusive about displaying work of all the students, there is no screening or short listing of the work to be put up as visual displays, and everyone gets the chance to showcase their work on the school walls and notice boards.
The Riverside School displays and showcases acts of empathy and inclusion on a bulletin board with ‘shout outs’. This board is to put up any act of kindness that the children or staff members have experienced or noticed that made them or someone else feel included and supported, as well as to praise specific positive behaviours. The person writing the shout out specifies the time, place and the person.
Sapling Nursery, Baner Road, Pune was started in 2005 by Kamla Idgunji. It is part of the Sapling Nursery chain of preschools in Pune – the first of which was founded in 1995. Sapling Nursery aims to nurture children with free play and discipline and helps them develop physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills for the healthy growth of their personality. They have been a proponent of inclusive culture and practices. Some of these are:

**ALWAYS CHILD FIRST:**
The school follows the policy of ‘Always Child First’. If a child is not able to adopt the regular learning methods, changes are made as per the need of the child and with the parent’s cooperation.

**ADMISSION POLICY:**
The only criteria for admission is ‘first come first served’, and an admission test is not conducted. They have children from varying economic backgrounds.

**STAFF RECRUITMENT:**
Some Sapling teachers are parents of students who once studied at Sapling and have returned to teach at Sapling after completing courses in Early Childhood Education. Sapling also recruits teachers with developmental disabilities like hearing impairment, Down Syndrome, learning disabilities. These teachers mainly function as shadow teachers to the main teacher in a classroom. Quite a few of the support staff have been promoted to teaching staff at Sapling.

**ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:**
For the students from economically weaker backgrounds, whenever a parent reaches out, Sapling provides additional support in the form of paying the fees for the child’s dance class or other classes and even after the child has left the school.
When inclusive practices and policies are adopted and reinforced at every level and in every aspect of being in a school (whether it’s inside the classroom or outside the classroom), it can lead to a shift in behaviour and habits which will ultimately help nurture truly inclusive communities.

When schools encourage participation in music, art, dance, sport and community engagement up to high school, it gives students with learning differences, who might struggle with academics, an opportunity to be a part of, and potentially excel in and exhibit leadership in other areas. These opportunities are not regarded as extra-curricular but are as much a part of the curriculum as any other ‘mainstream’ subject.

The Orchid School includes Life Skills and Community Projects in the curriculum from Grade 5 until the child graduates from the school.
The Riverside School has inclusion as a focus in the curriculum by design. The curriculum is examined to ensure inclusion by religion, gender, sexuality and food choices. The school keeps the child at the center of its curriculum and children are encouraged through all grades to initiate and engage in projects that they care about within the community. Every child in the school has an opportunity to be part of a community project using the Design for Change (DFC) approach which believes in the ‘I CAN MINDSET’. They follow the framework of – feel, imagine, do, share. Through these community projects all children are equipped to be aware of the world around them, enabling them with the skills to take action and empowering them to design a more desirable and sustainable future. Some examples of the DFC community projects carried out by the students of Riverside are – students creating a specific route for a child in a wheelchair to come to school; helping with rag-picking and garbage sorting; and recapping child rights at a municipal school.
SPECIAL RESOURCE CENTER TEAM

Special resource/learning centers and/or teams are available for all stakeholders in the school to provide additional academic as well as behavioural/ emotional support. Most of the inclusive mainstream schools prioritize recruitment of special educators, counsellors, remedial teachers and occupational therapists. To provide support and cater to the needs of children with diverse needs, it becomes crucial to have specialized staff who work in unison with the mainstream teachers. They provide in service training, to ensure that students with special needs and their families have access to the appropriate supports and interventions in order to facilitate improved achievement in a school environment. A minimum ratio of 1:80 special educators: students was seen across schools visited. Some had even more support such as The Heritage School, with 3 CBSE schools in New Delhi, which has 2 special educators for every grade till Grade 7 and 1 special educator for Grades 8 to 10.

CLASS-WIDE SUPPORT

SMALL WORK GROUP

Classrooms are structured to support working in small groups all the way up to higher grades. This provides ongoing opportunities for students to engage in peer learning, peer support and peer tutoring. There are various pedagogical approaches to form small work groups which bring out the strengths of each student and help each member shine. Work groups within the classroom can include: forming heterogeneous groups (whereby diverse students can apply their skills and abilities); having each member of the group assigned a special role (like questioner, problem-solver) or task (like note-taker, time-keeper); having flexible seating for group work, etc. Special emphasis is given to not only forming small groups within the classroom, but also in structuring the small groups to include students with mixed abilities sitting together so as to facilitate peer tutoring between students. Unfortunately, in many schools this structure is no longer maintained after elementary school.

However, in some schools like the Heritage and Riverside schools, the structure of working in small groups, which have students of varying abilities in each, is maintained up to the end of high school. In addition, groups are reinforced by grades or comments for maximum participation of all group members rather than just graded for the quality of the project.

Samait Shala has made ‘group work’ a mandatory step for teaching any topic. After the teacher introduces a topic, students are first asked to think and discuss in their
INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENTS

Teachers often struggle with the assessment of children with disabilities. In the schools we visited, many had evolved ways to set individual goals, and diverse ways of assessing student learning based on these goals. The focus was on what the student could do – i.e. based on their abilities (and areas of strength) using different assessment tools and criteria.

The general assumption is that extra time or a calculator should be provided only during exams and not for class work, which limits the purpose of giving compensation and access arrangements. The Inclusion Committee in BIS, lobbied for access arrangements for students with disabilities even during non-exam times.

Khoj Community School is an example where teachers create and conduct individualised monthly assessments of each child. They cater to different learning styles through these assessments. Each class has two teachers and to conduct these assessments, one teacher asks one child at a time to sit with her outside the class. She uses a form of personalized assessment relying on oral, written and visual methods to assess the child. We observed that the child was allowed to sit in a position which she/he finds most comfortable. Each assessment is designed keeping the child’s need and level in mind, which the teacher observes throughout the year. This helps the child develop at her/his own pace.
Abhyudaya Nagar Mumbai Public School, an Akanksha Foundation-run government school in Mumbai uses the approach of scaffolding while framing questions where the first few questions are lower order questions with the difficulty level of the questions increasing gradually.

**JOINT LESSON PLANNING**

Lessons for students who need additional support are planned jointly by the teacher and special educator in collaboration with each other.

HLC International School, Chennai, an IGCSE school started in 1995 is an Ashoka Changemaker School (Ashoka, a leading NGO, runs a program called Ashoka Changemaker Schools to enable all students to become changemakers. These are young people who have the skills and confidence to change the world for the good of all). Lesson plans are created using skill-based learning where independence, critical thinking skills, collaboration and active learning (where students are actively involved in the learning process) are developed at the same time as knowledge is acquired. Individualized learning plans are created in unison by the mainstream teacher, special educator, student, parents and coordinators.

Akshar School, Kolkata is an I.C.S.E and I.S.C board inclusive school where children with additional needs learn along with mainstream children. An IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is created for children who require additional support and this involves teachers, students, parents and coordinators. Since parents know their child the best, teachers conduct meetings with them to discuss the IEP and what support to the child should look like. Parent inputs and agreement are taken to finalize the IEP for the child. Some parents are invited to observe the child in the class, on how she/he is responding to the support provided. In addition, while in the class parents are encouraged to respond to any questions other children have, to make the environment more approachable and acceptable.
Name: xxxxx  
Class: Grade 3  
Name of the Teacher: xyz

Date from: 10/01/2020 to: 10/04/2020
Age: 8 years

Diagnosis: Learning Disabilities

Strengths of the child: xxxxx is compliant and has a very good sitting tolerance. She likes Maths and enjoys playing with her Rubik’s cube.

Present Level of Performance: In language, xxxxx can decode words and sentences when given a Grade 2 level passage with pauses. Her speed of reading is slow and fluency is scattered.

In Math: xxxxx understands the number concept and can understand the concept of addition using pictures.

Annual Goal: Reading - By the end of 12 months when given a Grade 2 level passage, xxxxx will be able to read the text at the fluency rate of 120 words per minute, 5 out of 5 times independently at home and in school.

Math - By the end of 12 months, xxxxx will be able to solve 2 digit addition sums with carryover on a worksheet, at school or at home 5 out of 5 times independently.

### Area | Skill Targeted | Short Term Goal | Strategies | Criteria of Success
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Language | Fluency | In the next 3 months, xxxxx will be able to read 25 words from flash cards in a minute. In the next 3 months, xxxxx will be able to read a given passage consisting of 20 words in one minute. | Paired or choral reading. Audio recorder to record and listen. | 3 out of 5 times correctly with help.
Math | Addition | xxxxx will solve single digit addition sums without carryover with pictures on a worksheet with help. | Revising concept of addition with objects or coins. Teach Math vocabulary like, in total, sum of, altogether, more than, etc. | 2 out of 4 times correctly with help.

Special Accommodations:  
- Concessions for oral reading exams  
- Reader during assessments/ exams

Signature:
Special Needs in the Classroom: A Teacher Education Guide by UNESCO suggests that having a shadow teacher is often not helpful as it does not promote interaction with the class teacher and peers. Instead a co-teacher or teaching aide may be of more value.

We observed that each classroom in The Shri Ram School, New Delhi has a main teacher and a co-teacher. A teaching aide/co-teacher is available in classrooms with children with special needs. This co-teacher works more closely with students who need additional support, but is also available to all children. When asked, all children viewed the co-teacher as ‘one of my teachers’ and not as a specialist for the children who need additional help.

Lesson plans by the teachers can include differentiation of how it will be taught to students at different levels of learning. Differentiation in lesson planning involves catering to the different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinaesthetic) and to the different levels to engage all students and meet their needs.

Teachers from Golden Spiral School, Mumbai (a Waldorf inspired school) plan at different levels. For example, for Math, the teacher makes three columns on the blackboard – the middle one is for everyone to solve, the third column (with challenging questions) is for children who have completed the middle one and still have time. The first column (with easier questions on the same concept) is for children who find the middle column too challenging. The students are allowed to choose the column they want to attempt. To facilitate the study of languages, books are kept on shelves based on their level of reading difficulty and students are asked to choose which shelf they want to pick books from.

Students are the most important of all the stakeholders in schools and receiving feedback from them on teaching includes them in the process, which is meant to enhance and support their learning. This certainly helps teachers plan and prepare keeping the needs of the end users in mind. Feedback from students is elicited on an ongoing basis. Students have an opportunity to share their feedback about teaching and content along guided criteria.
The Orchid School uses an online portal for students to share their feedback for each of their subject teachers including sports, fine arts and music. Feedback is designed as per the student’s grade level. Some of the basic criteria for giving feedback are – subject competency, content, time management, creativity, approachability. This feedback is then collated and provided to the teacher, which is then discussed with the unit head for strengths and areas which may need improvement. This feedback is included in the annual staff-appraisal system. The purpose is to include that one stakeholder in the appraisal process whose feedback is the most valuable and impactful for a teacher to achieve the learning outcome, motivation and professional growth.

**SELF-EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK**

Given a choice and an opportunity to set goals for ourselves and evaluate our work leads to increased scope of ownership, responsibility and accountability. It not only makes us think and reflect but also leads to better outcomes with the right support. The same applies to students in schools, when they are given ongoing opportunities to self-evaluate their work by reviewing their own tests and assignments, they reflect on ways to improve their own performance.

The Orchid School follows a system of self-evaluation for middle and secondary school students. Every academic year these students create an online portfolio, where at the beginning of every quarter they fill an academic goal for themselves (based on their past performance). Students then assess their performance as per the goal at the end of the quarter. The school conducts regular Student Parent Teacher Conferences (SPTC), where the student shares her/his thoughts and observations about the self-evaluation with the teacher and parents. Students are given a chance to reflect on whether they have achieved their goal, what they are doing well and what they can do to be better. Teachers and parents work together in providing support to the child as per her/his specific area of improvement.
INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS THROUGH SUPPORT SERVICES

Specific modified targeted interventions are created for students who need additional support in collaboration with the teacher and the special resource team in consultation with the student and parents.

In Bombay International School (BIS) a counsellor, special educator and/or a teaching aide is available to all children in the school irrespective of the academic functioning and/or other strengths and challenges. They provide one-to-one support through regular interactions with these children. Plans are made keeping the requirement of the child in mind. The teacher also gives additional attention and support to these students during the lesson while other students are completing the tasks given by the teacher. Targeted support is provided to the child during the second/third language class (from which the child is exempt) and there is no compromising on extra-curricular time for that child.
Inclusive education is possible if the teaching fraternity is sensitised towards the needs of special children. My 12-year-old sister who has Down Syndrome, has studied in a regular school for the most part of her life because her teachers were made aware of her needs. Today if you look at my sister, she is not very different from regular children when it comes to her behaviour and mannerism, which is thanks to the fact that she got to study in a regular school during her formative years.

Akib Ansari, 20 years, sibling
Demystification sessions are conducted for all students to build awareness on and sensitise students towards children with disabilities. All students are also sensitised on why different students may need support in certain areas.

Step-by-Step School, New Delhi (an inclusive school that is specially committed to children with special needs) has initiated a sensitisation program with demystification sessions with the aim to embrace diversity in their daily interactions with peers. It not only unfolds the mysteries of the unknown to the child but also enables her/him to understand the way in which to learn better. The demystification process helps children recognise their talents and appreciate and accept themselves for the way they are. It is believed that acceptance is born out of understanding. These sessions enable students to accept their peers with special needs by understanding their strengths and challenges. Through these sessions, the students get a platform to ask questions about the cause of difficulties of their peers with special needs. At the end of the session, students feel more comfortable approaching peers with special needs and include them as a part of their group. Each child who is included in the group gets a buddy assigned to her/him who not only helps the child in the classroom but also outside it. The class teachers then, during the circle time lessons, address the needs of the group as and when they arise.

Bullying of vulnerable students often happens in unstructured spaces and times – such as the corridors and lunch rooms. Riverside School ensures that teachers are asked to be around spaces/areas that are unmonitored during break time so as to informally look out for/manage situations in which students are being excluded.
or bullied. The school articulates the teacher’s role outside the classroom as being aware of social trends and issues amongst students.

**CLUBS**

Clubs become social spaces where every student can belong irrespective of their level of skill. Abhyudaya Nagar Mumbai Public School gives an opportunity to each student to be a part of a club on subjects such as drama, music, dance, public speaking, Math and Science. They adopt a voting system from senior KG to Grade 9 and students get to vote for the clubs that they are interested in joining. Each student can choose the club that they want to be a part of based on the skill that they want to learn. Once the child chooses to be a part of a club, nobody, including the teachers and principal of the school, is given the authority to change or remove a child from a club.

**CLASS-WIDE SUPPORT**

**VOLUNTEER AND PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS**

Volunteer programs for working with students with disabilities can be made aspirational and attractive for students without disabilities. In the Shiv Nadar School, New Delhi, all students are encouraged to volunteer to support each other in the resource center/enrichment center or during camps. Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and children without Special Educational Needs are paired up. Children with SEN are given responsibilities and kept in charge of tasks that they can manage.

Step by Step School, focuses on social inclusion. When a child with disabilities is ready to move into mainstream, 2 children without disabilities interact with the child with special educational needs to familiarize her/him with the system.

Bombay International School has formed a Peer Support Group (PSG). Students who volunteer to be a part of the PSG undergo an intensive training program aimed to equip them with skills needed to fulfil the role of a peer supporter. The PSG is an alternative approachable body available for students to speak with and form a support structure for students in need of emotional support. The PSG also aims at working towards a handful of awareness-based discussions on common issues within the community.
Circle time is group time in which students and the teacher sit together in a circle for an activity which involves everyone (including the teacher) to participate and share. A range of educators have emphasised the role of circle time in developing a child’s social and emotional skills. In particular, they have emphasised the value of circle time in fostering attitudes of mutual respect amongst children. Through circle time, children can learn to share, take turns and cooperate with one another and develop speaking and listening skills. These skills can help children to work together in groups, thus leading to improvements across the curriculum.

The Heritage School has incorporated circle time from Nursery till Grade 10, primarily to work on the socio-emotional aspects. Teachers lead these circles which students take forward. Circle time takes place every morning for an hour, and for Grade 8 onwards it happens twice a week. Some of the topics that are discussed are bullying, sensitization, special needs, inclusion, life skills, etc. Counsellors are a part of these circles and a lot of time is spent on training the teachers.

Teachers at the Golden Spiral School give extra space and time to children who are not comfortable being in circle time. They are permitted to take their time to be ready for being in the circle.
**BUDDY SYSTEM**

**Between Grades**

At the Riverside School, an entire grade is paired/buddied with another grade. Both grades spend special time with each other such as eating lunch together once a week or playing together once a week. The children from the older grades often feel empowered and responsible to support the children from the younger grades in both academic and social areas. It also allows students to get to know each other as individuals rather than focus on a child’s disability.

**Individual**

Individual children are paired with others to provide support to each other with respect to academics as well as social and emotional concerns. This is incorporated in the lessons as pair-work and for other activities like supporting each other with homework, completion of pending work, or working on a project together.
Riverside School was started in 2001 and is affiliated to the Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). Their single-minded focus is on student wellbeing. They have designed, implemented and shared a unique user-centered curriculum that provides schools with an alternative model which focuses on quality of learning AND student wellbeing. Riverside takes an inclusive approach in school with regard to different stakeholders. Some of the inclusive practices that were observed are:

**EDUCATION FRAMEWORK:**
They have adopted a framework driven by the Design Thinking approach which cultivates empathy, ethics, excellence, elevation and evolution through a growth mindset.

**VARIED TEACHING METHOD:**
They have adopted the feel, imagine, do and share model for student learning. Here students are given the opportunity to learn by discussing, experiencing, taking initiatives and reflecting.

**BUDDY SYSTEM:**
Students get the opportunity to work with each other and support each other as buddies inside and outside the classroom.

**SHOUT OUT WALL:**
One notice board at the foyer of the school is designated as the ‘shout out wall’. Everyone (students, teachers) is invited and encouraged to use this board to put up any experience or act of kindness that they have experienced or noticed that has made them feel good, included and supported. Children and teachers regularly use this wall to show gratitude and empathy.

**VISUAL REMINDERS ABOUT BEING INCLUSIVE:**
Words are painted on the steps such as ‘be the change’, ‘say’, ‘feel’, ‘do’, ‘share’ as constant reminders for the children. They have also put up posters and images on the notice boards for children to constantly look at.

**CLASSES FOR PARENTS:**
They conduct English language sessions, computer sessions, sessions for wellbeing (health and hygiene, stress management) and entrepreneurial training for parents.
Opportunities for families to engage informally with the school helps them understand the school’s philosophy of inclusion. It also sets the tone for equity and inclusion amongst staff and families.

Peepul School invites parents to meet with the principal, school social worker and other staff over a cup of tea called Chai Pe Baatcheet (‘Chatting over a cup of tea’). Families have a platform to discuss a range of topics including their aspirations for their child and what more can be done to support the child, sports programs, health, nutrition and parenting. They also get opportunities to learn from other parents and to support each other.
SPEND A DAY AT SCHOOL

At the HLC International School, one day in the week is dedicated to parents visiting the school and spending the entire day there to get a better understanding of the school’s philosophy and culture. This visit includes a tour of the school (usually given by a student) as well as provides an opportunity for parents to sit in on classes and observe how their child learns and interacts with other children, to meet and talk to other parents as well as teachers, and to get to know more about the school through their own experience.

SUPPORT GROUP FOR PARENTS

Support groups for parents of children with and without disabilities allow families to feel a sense of community within the school, and prevent the isolation that many of these families feel. When space and time is provided within the school it reflects the school’s commitment to creating this sense of community.

At Bombay International School, the support group for parents of children with disabilities meets on one Saturday in the month and provides a safe space for families to discuss multiple issues.

At The Shri Ram School, a support group for parents initially started out as a group for parents of children with special needs. This then extended to include other parents of students without disabilities when each parent was invited to bring along another parent. This group was later able to support students with disabilities by providing practical work experience and internships in various fields through the parent network.
Engaging parents in supporting other parents and students builds an inclusive school community. At the Riverside School programs/classes are organized for parents in literacy, computer skills, etc. English classes are organised twice a week and parents are taught what the children learn in class. Parent volunteers also work with teachers on designing field trips for students who need educational support and exposure to experiences which will help in their learning.

At St. Mary’s School, volunteer parents are trained in teaching skills so as to be able to work as co-teachers. On completion of the training, parents are placed in classrooms that require additional support for children with special needs.

Members of the community, volunteers, etc. are invited to be a part of weekly meetings to present a fresh perspective on any issue. This helps to understand how members of the community perceive the issue and provides a more realistic approach to the issue. This also offers an opportunity for other community members to understand the school’s philosophy and values. Some parents are asked to even conduct a few sessions in the meetings by sharing their expertise on particulars subjects. Samait Shala has been following this practice for their weekly meetings.
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 states that children with disabilities will be enabled to fully participate in the regular schooling process from the foundational stage to higher education in India. Schools/school complexes will be provided resources for the integration of children with disabilities, recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training, and for the establishment of resource centers, wherever needed, especially for children with severe or multiple disabilities.

Our hope is that through the best practices shared in this document, mainstream schools will be motivated and empowered to work towards developing a sustainable inclusive culture. This includes putting in place policies and practices to create safe spaces for children with diverse needs to reach their maximum learning potential, both academically and socially.
REFERENCES


Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is Government of India’s flagship program for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) in a time bound manner, as mandated by 86th amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory Education to the Children of 6-14 years age group, a Fundamental Right. As an intervention programme, it started in 2002. http://shikshaabhiyan.org.in


SWIFT Education Centre: http://swiftschools.org/

The Lancet’s Series on child development. 2007 and 2011.


We would like to express our gratitude towards all the schools mentioned in this document, who have graciously shared the details of inclusive practices adopted by them. Their contribution has helped accumulate these concrete practices which can help a lot of other schools to become inclusive.

It is our hope that schools continue to share the great work, to add to this document.

We would like to thank the H T Parekh Foundation for supporting us in the development and production of this document. The H T Parekh Foundation was set up by HDFC Limited, to commemorate the significant contribution of its founder Shri H T Parekh to the social and development sector in India. The Foundation has been a valuable partner in Ummeed’s work in the field of children with disabilities.

We would also like to thank an anonymous donor for their continued support towards carrying out the research and content development for this document.
“Every child is special no matter what their needs are. Accept children the way they are and sensitize your kids to understand that everyone is unique and special in this world and everyone has come here with a purpose and everyone has a skill to develop.”

School Leader at Abhyudaya Nagar Municipal School, Mumbai

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmx4xaxC1WM