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Transformation to inclusive education: the next steps

Inclusive education is about everyone learning, growing and flourishing – **together** – in all our diversity. Inclusive education recognises **the right of every child and young person** – without exception – to be included in general education settings. It involves adapting the environment and teaching approaches to ensure genuine and valued full participation of all children and young people. It embraces human diversity and welcomes all as **equal** members of an educational community.



Leadership is required to bring about the substantial change needed to facilitate inclusive education, ensuring that every child and young person can fully and genuinely participate, and have the contribution they make recognised.

Educators need to be supported to think outside the square, and false assumptions and low expectations regarding the capabilities and behaviours of children and young people who experience disability need to be challenged. The rejection and disestablishment of ableism, and transformation at all levels of education, are needed to uphold the rights of all children and young people – this requires committing to an ongoing process of becoming inclusive.

Reflecting on these issues not only raises the matter of the cultural shift required, but also the practical considerations for transformation towards inclusive education. It is important to acknowledge both the magnitude of this change and the fact that it happens little by little within everyday exchanges. A necessary starting point is always to consider the existing strengths within any given system or setting. It is from recognising what we already do well that we can move forward to address what we need to do better. Additionally, it is important to start with a clear vision of where we are heading, why, and what steps are needed to get there. From here, we can engage in an ongoing, iterative cycle of planning and review – implementing, observing, reflecting, and then planning again.

Recommended next steps

- **Develop and implement a National Action Plan for Inclusive Education to ensure a successful transition for parallel systems of education to one inclusive system of education**

Conduct a comprehensive review of policy and practice at all levels of the education system and develop a national plan with measurable actions and robust monitoring and

accountability to ensure the rights of students who experience disability are upheld, consistent with Australia's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and in keeping with the UN's definition of inclusive education. There must be no confusion or conflation of inclusion with any forms of exclusion, including assimilation, integration or remediation. Careful attention needs to be paid to how the evidence-base on inclusive education is translated to policy, practice and funding systems in order to create an achievable plan for the transition from parallel 'special' and 'mainstream' education systems to one education system for all. This includes a reallocation of current funding to ensure that the distribution of education funds fully and equitably supports the transition and ongoing successful functioning of a genuinely inclusive education system.

- **Ensure that no new segregated settings (schools, preschools, centres, units or classrooms) are created**

As part of the review, the educational practices and culture of segregated schools should be specifically examined, with a view to defining policy and funding arrangements that are consistent with Australia's obligations, the research evidence, and contemporary theory. This needs to include a clear plan to ensure a positive transition of current students to a fully inclusive education system. A key initial step in moving towards this system is to cease the creation of new segregated settings.

- **Ensure the full recognition of human rights**

From the above review, define clear expectations for inclusive education in Australian schools. As part of the review process, conduct a robust review, in consultation with organisations of persons with disability, of the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and implement the recommendations in the new standards. These expectations also need to ensure there is no implicit hierarchy of students and that no students can be considered 'too disabled' for inclusive education. As such, it needs to be explicit that there are no exceptions to the fundamental human right to inclusive education.

- **Foster a culture of inclusion**

Addressing ableism within and beyond education settings and systems is essential to facilitating inclusive education. This includes the need for policy to engage the broader community with anti-ableist education and disability equity education.

- **Introduce compulsory, comprehensive and ongoing teacher education for inclusion**

Ongoing pre-service and in-service professional development for educators on inclusive education (not to be confused with special education) is essential (including developing awareness regarding ableism and the provisions of the CRPD). Within pre-service teacher education, the CRPD requires at least one compulsory core (semester-long) subject in every teacher education program that is solely dedicated to inclusive education. This approach is complemented, but not replaced, by an embedded approach throughout the curriculum. At least one subject dedicated to critical disability studies, free of ableism and underpinned by a disability equity education approach, is also recommended.

- **Build the foundations for successful collaboration for inclusion**

Inclusive education practice should become an integral part of education for all allied health and education leaders and other education support professionals. Additionally, teachers and allied professionals require support for collaborating for inclusion. This includes addressing the considerable policy gap regarding the use of paraprofessional support. Information and support for families to assist with the currently complex and often very frustrating process of advocating for inclusive education is also essential.

- **Ensure flexible and responsive curriculum and assessment approaches**

The role of differentiation in teaching practice is clearly identified in the implementation of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD). Further development of policy to ensure differentiated, universal approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, environments and assessment are required, with space needed for flexible and responsive approaches. Clear consideration of the impacts of high-stakes student achievement testing is also required.

- **Listen to students**

Ongoing commitment to direct, accountable and regular consultation with students who experience disability and their families is required across all aspects of policy-making and implementation for inclusive education.

- **Prioritise disability equity education**

Further development of the diversity approach within the *Australian Curriculum*, the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, and the *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*, and all State/Territory based frameworks is needed to incorporate disability equity education, including awareness-raising regarding ableism and educational practice.

This fact sheet is drawn from the 2019 report *Towards inclusive education: a necessary process of transformation*. It was written by Dr Kathy Cologon, Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University for Children and Young People with Disability Australia.

For more information and to read the full report, visit www.cyda.org.au