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What is inclusive education?

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.



All children and young people in Australia have the right to an **inclusive education**, but a lack of understanding of what this means, combined with frequent misuse of the term, can stop this becoming a reality.

Inclusive education:

- values and supports the full participation of all children together within mainstream educational settings
- creates a situation where all children and young people can be valued, experience a sense of belonging and where they are encouraged to reach their full potential in all areas of development
- is free from discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and practices
- welcomes and values diversity as a resource rather than a problem, and recognises impairment as one of many forms of human diversity
- requires the transformation of educational systems, settings, policies and practices to provide the best possible education for all
- involves an ongoing process of removing barriers to active involvement and shared learning
- requires recognising that we are all equally human and putting this into action in everyday, practical ways
- is also about engaging inclusively with families.

Inclusive education is *not*:

- changing children and young people to fit within current exclusionary systems
- an 'added extra' or 'special effort' born out of kindness or charity
- simply being present in a mainstream classroom – this is only a starting point

- allowing a student to attend school on a conditional basis (e.g. only allowing attendance for part of the school day or if an aide/parent/caregiver is present)
- participating in a different curriculum with a different teacher/aide
- segregating students into 'special' schools, classes or units, or in the classroom or playground.

Busting some common myths

Myth 1: Inclusive education is only for some students

Inclusive education is not a 'favour' or 'privilege' for some of us; it is a human right for all, which benefits everyone. Inclusive education is not about 'fitting in' students who can 'keep-up' with a one-size-fits-all curriculum. On the contrary, inclusive education is about creating educational opportunities and settings that enable everyone to flourish. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiation are key approaches to quality education for all.

Myth 2: Students with intellectual disability or complex disability cannot be included in general education settings

All students – without exception – have the right to be included. We know from research evidence that inclusive education is good for everyone, including those of us who are labelled as having severe and complex or multiple and profound disability. In Italy, special schools were closed and segregated education ended in 1977 and there are other examples throughout the world – Australia is lagging behind.

Myth 3: Inclusive education leads to poorer educational outcomes for students who do not experience disability

Substantial research evidence demonstrates that inclusive education results in higher quality education for *all* students, with no negative educational outcomes. There are considerable benefits of inclusive education for students who do not experience disability, as well as for those who do. These benefits include increased quality of teacher engagement, as well as educational, social and behavioural outcomes.

Myth 4: A school or early childhood service cannot include a student because it does not have enough resources

Families frequently encounter considerable resistance and gatekeeping by schools and early childhood services when they seek an inclusive education for a student who experiences disability. Students and families express significant distress and negative psychosocial impacts as a consequence of these exclusionary experiences. Despite the ongoing mantra of 'parent choice', they can be left feeling that they have no option other than segregated education. Educational leaders play a key role in creating a culture of inclusion. Inclusive education is a legal right for every child and young person and support is available for every school and every early childhood setting.

Myth 5: Inclusive education can occur in segregated settings

The term 'inclusive education' has been co-opted by many. Separating children and young people on the basis of disability is the last remaining 'respectable' form of segregation in schooling. However, segregated education, where students attend in isolation from their peers without disability (in segregated schools, classes or units), is not inclusive education.

Myth 6: Inclusion is when a student attends a 'mainstream' school but they are withdrawn from the class for 'special' education or units

Withdrawing a child or young person from the classroom for a 'special' class or unit for part of the day, week or year is not inclusive education. If the student is not supported to genuinely and fully participate alongside their peers, then the student is not actually included. If the student is separated from the group through the provision of 'support', this isolates the student educationally, physically and socially, with a wide range of detrimental outcomes.

Myth 7: Students who experience disability have better educational outcomes in specialist settings

Despite the logic of this myth, given the smaller class sizes, the common presence of specialist resources and teacher training, research across six decades now clearly demonstrates that it is not true. Students who experience disability have equal or better educational outcomes in general education settings, and genuine inclusive education leads to better educational outcomes for everyone.

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



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