

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS



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ABSTRACT

In writing a booklet to support inclusive practice we are well aware that many teachers have concerns about students with disabilities in the mainstream. We appreciate the perspective that teaching one or more students with a disability in a typical class is just one of a number of challenges that include changes to the curriculum, public scrutiny of your students' performance in basic subjects, and the requirement to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds. However, we remain positive and optimistic about teachers' capacity to respond to diversity and many are doing it with great success.

Funding is an issue that concerns many teachers because funding criteria have not always included the students who are most challenging – those students who may not have a diagnosis of anything but whose learning and/or behavioural needs dominate time, attention and energy.

Some teachers are concerned about additional administration and paperwork, the lack of time for necessary consultation with colleagues, and insufficient support for providing an appropriate

curriculum, particularly in secondary school.

Move to include students with disabilities in the mainstream.

Including students with disabilities in the educational mainstream is neither an Australian nor a recent phenomenon. International agreements have confirmed the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools and legislation supports that choice.

Although not without its critics or tensions, this type of legislation reflects the way many western societies are tending to view themselves these days – acknowledging and celebrating diversity in the population, being more careful about what is considered special or different and attempting to be inclusive of all citizens in the services that are provided.

Australia's Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Standards for Education (2005) are exerting a major influence on schools as they focus on the rights of students with a disability to access education *on the same basis* as students without a disability and with *reasonable accommodations or adjustments*.

Accommodations and adjustments are measures or actions that teachers and schools make in relation to learning environments, teaching and learning activities and assessments that enable students to access and participate fully in achieving curriculum outcomes.

The Disability Standards specify how the Disability Discrimination Act should be interpreted in relation to enrolment, participation, curriculum access, use of support services and freedom from harassment.

Inclusive practice

Inclusive practice describes any and all efforts made by a school and its community to make students and their parents feel welcome. Inclusive practice implies that if Participation becomes an issue for

any means that students who previously would have been educated in separate settings have a right to be educated in the company of their siblings and peers at their local schools or in their schools of choice.

Inclusive practice requires school leadership and vision that foster a sense of community and emphasise the importance of relationships. Inclusive school culture is one nurtured by constant development of staff capacity to include students, collaborate with other professionals and work in partnership with parents. Such a positive culture also fosters team planning, collaborative teaching, cooperative learning and transition planning for students as they progress through their schooling.

Student, whether arising from disability, Gender, behavior, poverty, culture, refugee status or any other reason, then the desirable approach is not to establish special programs for the newly identified individual or group need, but to expand mainstream thinking, structures and practices so that all students are accommodated.

Inclusive practice involves a change in mindset about how society, schools and students work together to allow all students to achieve meaningful individual and group learning outcomes.

For students with recognised individual needs that are related to disability, inclusive practice requires new ways of thinking about disability, difference and interdependence.

Plans for individual students

Some students, particularly those who have developmental disabilities or complex learning needs, may have some form of individual plan. These plans have different names in different states, e.g. “Learning Support Plans” (New South Wales), “Negotiated Education Plans” (South Australia) and “Individual Education Plans” (Tasmania). In Western Australia, the term “Documented Plan” is used as an umbrella term for a whole range of plans for learning, transition, behaviour and so on. Sometimes

teams of individuals including therapists, educational consultants, parents, advocates and the students themselves draw up these plans together with the teacher. This approach is called “transdisciplinary” and it involves individuals from different disciplines. points of view are incorporated. However as you may be the person who has daily contact with the student, you could end up with most of the work. This may not bother you but at least be alert at the individual planning meeting to ensure that specialists and consultants don’t expect you to implement elaborate interventions without providing practical support.

Individual plans are useful but if they are not school-based the objectives they contain may not relate closely to the curriculum. Apart from the burden this places on teachers (in trying to deliver an individual curriculum in a group situation), having a student on an alternate curriculum may put a negative focus on the student, disrupt the learning of other students, basically “velcro” the student to the teaching assistant and unnecessarily complicate life for the teacher.

Although states and territories have their own curriculum policies and guidelines, many are moving towards a common curriculum for all students - one that is sufficiently differentiated so that there is something relevant and appropriate for every student. This approach is based on the principle of “universal design” which means that the design of the curriculum itself, and the instructional materials and activities, provide alternatives for students with differing abilities. The idea is that if students do need an adapted curriculum, it is best for everyone if it is derived from the same general curriculum.

Setting up the inclusive classroom

Classroom climate

An important part of providing an inclusive classroom is to set positive standards for behaviour and ensure the tone of the class is supportive and affirming for all students.

- Set **firm but fair behavioural standards** at the start of the school year. You should send a very clear message that you expect the classroom to be a place of respect, civility, and learning.
- If you teach in a team, make sure that all members of the instructional team use **consistent discipline practices**. Students become angry and frustrated when they are given different behavioural expectations and consequences in the same setting.
- Consider introducing class self- management tools e.g. teach students to hold class meetings and make decisions collaboratively on a range of items and events each week.
- Classroom rules: Keep them short and sweet. Classroom rules tend to be most effective when they are few in number (i.e. 3-5) and stated in positive terms whenever possible (e.g., “Work quietly at your desk” rather than “Don’t disturb other students!”).
- Students are more respectful of rules when they have had a voice in formulating them. Post rules prominently and review them occasionally to remind students that you value appropriate behaviours.
- Get to know your students from the beginning. Students are less likely to misbehave or act disrespectfully toward the teacher if they have a positive relationship with him or her. Get to know your class as individuals by making up a simple survey of student interests and reward preferences to complete at the start of the school year.
- Every move you make ... they are watching you! Teachers should never forget that they are powerful role models for their students. Because they shape student behaviours by their own example, teachers should hold themselves to the same standards of civility and respect that they expect of their students.
- Draw up a classroom crisis plan with the students – one that will be your response to any likely

crisis. If you have a plan, your responses to possible crisis situations (such as an asthma attack, an accident or intruders etc) will be quicker and more appropriate.

- Let students know how passionate you are about learning and teaching. Students respond well to enthusiastic, respectful, teachers who love to learn themselves

Teaching learning skills

When we think about successful learners we realise that they

- Relate their class work to clearly defined long-range goals.
- Have taken control of their educational experiences.
- Have learned to be aware of their own learning and thinking processes.
- Recognise that understanding takes place over time; it is seldom immediate.
- Use more than one sensory channel to improve their learning.
- Look for underlying structure in what they are learning

General differentiation strategies

The availability of “respectful tasks” and “scaffolding” in a classroom may make only limited adaptations necessary. Quality teaching and supported learning occur in the presence of

1. Respectful Tasks: These are tasks that are interesting and engaging for every learner, provide access to essential knowledge, understandings and skills, and refer to tasks that are neither boring nor frustrating.

2. Scaffolding: This refers to any kind of differentiating that provides the support needed for a

student to succeed in challenging work. Scaffolding also means that you are planning student work and presenting materials from simple to complex in such a layered way as to build student mastery and, thus, confidence.

If your tasks are respectful and scaffolding is provided in a non-labelling way, students respond positively, engaging in learning in increasingly independent ways.

Some differentiation strategies which teachers find helpful in keeping work challenging and success attainable are:-

- **Finding Entry Points:** This strategy allows a student to explore a given topic through as many as five avenues or entry points such as narrational (presenting a story or narrative about the topic or concept in question), logical-quantitative (using numbers or deductive/scientific approaches to the topic or question), foundational (examining the philosophy and vocabulary that under gird the topic or concept), aesthetic (focusing on the sensory features of the topic or concept), experiential (using a hands-on approach where the student deals directly with materials that represent the topic or concept). You can make each entry point a valid one for learning and exploring and ask students to share acquired insights to the same topic.

- **Complex Instruction Tasks:** A strategy for differentiating instruction in heterogeneous classrooms. Complex instruction tasks (a) require students to work together in small groups; (b) are designed to draw upon the intellectual strengths of each student in the group; (c) are open-ended; (d) are intrinsically interesting to students; (e) are uncertain; (f) involve real objects; (g) provide materials and instructions in modified English if needed; (h) integrate reading and writing in ways that make them an important means to accomplishing a desirable goal; (i) draw upon multiple intelligences in a real-world way; (j) use multimedia; (k) require many different talents in order to be completed adequately. An effective complex instruction task does not have a single right answer, does not reflect low-level thinking, and does not involve simple memorisation of routine learning.

Specific differentiation strategies

Some students may need specific adaptations such as

- The amount of work or size of projects may need to be altered.
- Encouragement to complete work in small, manageable chunks. Students beginning a big project may need help organising an individual plan for completing it.
- Smaller projects with a gradual work up toward larger ones (for students who tire easily).
- More time to complete in-class tasks.
- Support for dealing with their perfectionist behaviour, e.g. being too fussy and never completing tasks on time.
- Flexible time schedules. Make assignments due over the course of several days or even weeks. Provide a range of time during which an assignment may be submitted.

Methods to deliver information may need to be modified for one or more students.

- Use multimedia (PowerPoint, interactive video etc.) to improve student access.
- Support your verbal instructions with visual reminders.
- Use illustrations accompanied by written directions for students who have difficulty retaining information.

- Make assignments open-ended so that students have opportunities to use higher level thinking skills.
- Offer class-based options, allowing students to choose books to read or a topic for a project for the whole class etc.
- Offer assessment mode options, allowing students the option of doing class work orally, in writing, or by creating artwork, drawing cartoons etc.
- Focus on their positive experiences, reassure and provide firm, consistent guidelines and opportunities for interaction with other students.
- Explain tasks and instructions in several ways, e.g. oral instructions, written instructions, or demonstrations. It can help some students if they are asked to reiterate lesson expectations so the teacher is sure that communication was clear.
- Provide students with physical disabilities with materials that allow for maximum independence. The physical environment of the classroom or materials may need to be adapted for their individual needs. Teachers should help students verbalise difficulties they are encountering in order to help them solve classroom problems.
- Position students with hearing impairments in the classroom so they can get the teacher's attention, read classmates' facial expressions and see the teacher's face. Directions should be provided in writing and through demonstration. These students can be involved in group activities but may need good amplification systems or sign interpreters to be available.
- Help students with visual impairments to know the layout of the classroom, where materials are located and don't rearrange the furniture without telling them.

- Enlist the support of other students to provide this type of individual attention and support.

Strategies for secondary school teachers

Inclusive practice in secondary schools is subject to many pressures – set curricula, external exams, competition between schools, parental choice, school structure and organisation, and in many settings, the emphasis on subjects rather than on students. However, students who have been successfully included in primary school are likely to want to attend the same high schools as their peers and friends.

The primary and secondary teachers in our study were all trained in the same universities and colleges yet they reported teaching differently. Clearly, teaching large numbers of students each week makes flexibility and response to individual needs of students far more challenging.

For inclusion to be successful, secondary teachers need the same skills and knowledge as their primary colleagues. The secondary teachers in our research stressed that teachers need

- x good teaching practices
- x good content knowledge, and
- x student knowledge

It may take a little longer than in a primary situation, but teachers can get to know their students personally by observing and listening to them, talking to parents and past teachers. Learning profiles give teachers knowledge of students as learners, particularly their strengths. The collaborative process involved in developing individual education plans helps to give teachers the information and skills they need to support their students.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' ambivalence is, in some ways, reassuring. It suggests that including students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms is a journey – not a destination. The fact that these successful teachers were prepared to “take a punt” based on their experience and knowledge indicates that no- one has all the answers and that strategies and solutions have to be developed for unique circumstances.

Inclusive practice involves collaborating with others, drawing on the pedagogical and content knowledge that you already have, being creative, resourceful and confident, trialing new ways of teaching, reflecting on the outcomes and being prepared to do things differently tomorrow. It also involves a commitment to meeting the individual learning needs of all of your students - some of whom may have a disability

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