

The Inclusivity Challenge

Within Reach
of Us All

*A discussion paper for
school communities*

The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion and debate within school communities. It supports school communities to explore beliefs and assumptions regarding inclusivity and promote more inclusive practices in schools.

The paper may also serve as a basis for school planning in support of the professional learning system priority for 2003 which is *Continuing the Challenge of Inclusivity: focusing on innovation in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment*.

When educators, parents, carers and members of the wider community have the opportunity to discuss issues related to inclusivity, they become very focused on how their school can provide quality educational outcomes for all students enrolled.

What is inclusivity?

The essence of inclusivity is understanding and catering for the different potentials, needs and resources of our students. One important aspect of this is meeting the needs of all students through **effective learning and teaching**.

Inclusivity in education starts with the recognition of our diversity. It is treating students as individuals rather than as an homogeneous group. It is about involving all students in classroom practices by valuing their uniqueness and what they bring to the classroom. It is about valuing their interests, experiences, abilities, insights, needs, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, learning styles and intelligences.

Inclusivity embraces the idea that since everyone is an individual, we need to organise schools, teaching and learning so that each student has a learning experience that 'fits'.

Catering for the educational needs of all students in our schools is a complex issue. The range of cultures, linguistic backgrounds, and social and economic situations within communities, the increasing demands of new technologies, accountability requirements in literacy and numeracy, providing enrichment and extension, and supporting students with special needs all add to this complexity.

For your consideration

What are the diverse needs and resources of students enrolled in your school?

How does your school overcome a 'one size fits all' approach?

Why the focus on inclusivity?

Inclusivity arises from the objective of improving educational outcomes for students and broader social justice considerations of equity, access and participation. With a more globalised and increasingly diverse society, inclusivity recognises that the operation of a democracy requires an in-depth understanding of a variety of perspectives and contributions as well as the ability to listen and learn from the lives and cultures of a variety of people.

While there are legislative requirements to ensure all students have equitable access to education, teachers also have a professional responsibility to address inclusivity in their practice.

The link between sociocultural factors and school success indicates that schools support the learning of some groups of students more than others. In particular, students from sociocultural backgrounds which most closely reflect the culture of the school and the staff perform better at school.

It is important that rather than having an education system for most students, we ensure that we have an education system for all students. Herein lies the promise of democracy, equal opportunity, meeting personal aspirations and social cohesion.

For your consideration

Why is it important for all staff to have an understanding of and commitment to equity?

What does it mean in practice?

Inclusivity in ACT schools

Shaping Canberra's Future, the ACT Government Budget Paper 2002-2003, outlines the Government's vision of a community that is inclusive of all Canberrans, is cohesive, fair, tolerant and optimistic, is committed to protecting the vulnerable and supporting those in need, and gives its children every chance to realise their potential.

Education is one of the ACT Government's priority areas. A key outcome is an innovative education and training system that is participative, inclusive, and supports life-long learning. The focus on participation and engagement for all, including the most disadvantaged, is particularly relevant for school communities and is reflected in the *Within Reach of Us All* suite of plans.

Inclusive outcomes of the *Within Reach of Us All* ACT Government Schools Plan include providing education environments which are safe, supportive, welcoming and have inclusive cultures, where students have equitable access to learning and where diversity is valued and racism overcome.

The *Student Support Action Plan 2002-2004* acknowledges the importance of developing curriculum and pedagogy which encompass all cultures and social backgrounds, develop genuine and ongoing partnerships between schools, parents and carers, business and the community, which encourage all students to complete schooling, and offer successful pathways to all.

Similarly the *Services to Indigenous People Action Plan 2002-2004* includes commitments such as students having equitable access to learning, education environments being safe, supportive, welcoming and culturally inclusive, the valuing of diversity and non-tolerance of racism.

The *ACT Government Schools Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan 2002-2004* has an overarching goal of providing a rich and diverse literacy and numeracy education for all students. One of its major commitments is promoting inclusive teaching practices that are responsive to student diversity.

The outcomes of the ACT Assessment Program (ACTAP) support schools to identify students at risk of not making progress and meet their needs through the development and implementation of appropriate programs. Emphasising the support of students at risk is necessary to reduce the gap between those achieving at the highest levels and those at the lowest.

For your consideration

How is your school implementing the *Within Reach of Us All* suite of plans?

What school actions from the plans is your school prioritising to address the needs of the diverse range of students enrolled?

Exploring beliefs about inclusivity

Research (Idol, 1997) has identified a number of attitudinal barriers to inclusivity. Teachers may feel:

Every student in a classroom should function at the curricular grade level, even though this is never the case.

They are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of all students.

The academic progress of other students will be affected.

The school is lacking the necessary support and resources and so students should be referred to an alternative placement/program when they experience difficulty in the classroom.

There are influencing variables beyond the teachers'/schools' control, eg dysfunctional family.

Balanced against these attitudinal barriers are non-deficit beliefs and values which are critical to inclusivity. These include:

All students are learners with the potential to achieve.

Students bring diverse resources and needs to the classroom.

People learn within social and cultural contexts.

Teachers make a difference.

Brown (2000) states that teachers can change pedagogies, curriculum and assessment practices to make tangible differences to the lives of marginalised students.

Beliefs vary but will be shaped by how empowered and skilled staff, parents, carers and community members feel as they work through the issues confronting them. Organisational factors (school structure, timetable, goals and priorities) and the availability of support (funding, resources, training and development) are also pivotal in shaping attitudes and confidence.

Collaborative planning to meet the needs of individuals and groups does require additional time and effort. Collaboration through team teaching and professional learning communities, including parents and carers, teachers and other professionals, has been successful in enhancing the learning outcomes of students.

For your consideration

Is family, culture and/or neighbourhood used as an explanation for inequity in your school?

How can we ensure non-deficit approaches to students at our school?

Does the language we use convey a sense of dignity?

Inclusive schools

Inclusive schools ensure that each student is challenged to achieve to high standards in ways that complement what they already know, what they can already do, and how they learn best.

Ensuring quality educational outcomes with opportunities for enrichment and extension for all students enrolled is the challenge for schools. One approach is to make diversity a curriculum standard by recognising that:

A student's resources, interests, talents, aspirations, ideals, concerns and needs are the best foundation for increasing that student's ability and motivation to learn.

A relevant and intellectually challenging curriculum matched to student needs is necessary to engage and connect students to their learning.

Different approaches impact differently on different groups of students.

Different students need different styles of instruction to acquire the learning schools offer.

Different students need different modes of assessment to demonstrate their learning.

Teachers need a rich repertoire of flexible learning and teaching strategies.

A non-deficit approach to students is essential by acknowledging and valuing their diverse sociocultural, language and ethnic backgrounds.

Schools are organised and structured flexibly in ways that are adaptable to the needs of teachers and students, eg team teaching models.

Ongoing communication with parents and carers is critical in developing inclusive schools. Regular and effective communication between home and school can support students to make the most of their opportunities at school. Parents and carers also add significant value to educational discussions about meeting the needs of students.

For your consideration

Are all students able to meaningfully engage with the curriculum and life of your school? Consider specific examples.

How are students supported to take up educational programs that meet their specific and collective needs and interests? What could you do better?

How can parents and carers contribute to the educational discussion about marginalised students in your school?

Some approaches to foster the learning of every student

Develop a broad and flexible repertoire of teaching strategies to address the different backgrounds, learning styles and capabilities of students.

Involve students actively in their learning through continuing dialogue, negotiation and reflection about their understandings, learning goals, learning processes and outcomes.

Make students the starting point of the curriculum and provide multiple points of entry to new learning.

Guide students to critically analyse information from a diverse range of texts, including multimedia texts, online resources, real-world texts and popular culture.

Study topics in depth and cover less breadth in the curriculum so that students may explore and reflect on their learning.

Include higher order thinking, intellectual engagement, critical literacy and connectedness to the world.

Scaffold the reading of texts by activating background knowledge and allowing students to make links to their own experiences and background.

Be flexible in what is 'right' and 'wrong'; what the student brings to meaning making varies with different social, cultural and linguistic contexts.

Scaffold challenging texts and tasks so students achieve success and more motivation to learn rather than using texts and tasks in which students feel 'talked down to'.

Use cooperative learning strategies and focus less on competition.

Scaffold the specialised language styles, vocabularies, text types and illustrations of all learning areas.

Promote more active learning in the classroom with less whole class teacher-directed instruction and less classroom time dedicated to 'fill in the blank' and other activity driven worksheets.

Where possible support students with special needs in regular classroom settings rather than organising students into ability groups and 'pull out' programs.

Involve all relevant teachers and parents and carers in discussions about supporting students at risk.

For your consideration

What range of learning opportunities do you provide so that all students are able to achieve optimum success and recognition?

In what ways do you provide all students with opportunities to participate in educational experiences that are personally and culturally meaningful to them?

Leadership for inclusivity

Lingard and Ladwig, in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, (1999), emphasise the importance of pedagogical leadership to complement managerial leadership. They conclude that 'without sufficient financial and emotional reinvestment in teacher professionalism, in the development of a learning community, and in improved classroom practices of pedagogy and assessment, a managerial approach does not generate improved student outcomes.'

Leaders who promote professional conversations through teacher learning communities support teachers to develop:

A clear school ethos and philosophy.

Changed organisational practice.

Shared norms and values.

Whole school approaches with a set of shared strategies and a common language to talk about pedagogy and meeting the needs of their student community.

A focus on pedagogy and student learning.

Reflective dialogue.

Collective responsibility and intraschool accountability.

More collaboration and sharing of effective practice to ensure teachers build on the learning of students across learning areas and year groups.

Non-deficit approaches without a culture of blame.

The leadership challenge is to build capacity from within. Principals and teachers do make a difference. To make more of a difference requires continuous reflection, an openness to new approaches and a willingness to grow.

For your consideration

How are teacher professional learning communities fostered in your school?

Is inclusivity on the agenda of these teacher professional learning communities?

An inclusive future

Inclusive schools focus on making education better for those at the margins of schooling so that all students are able to meaningfully engage with the curriculum and life of the school.

Inclusive schools help to build inclusive communities where people's differences are valued, where each member is supported to contribute, and where the human values created as a result enrich our society.

In an ideal world inclusive classrooms and schools would be a reality. In the real world inclusive classrooms and schools are ideals which are achievable.

Where does your school lie on the ideal ↔ real continuum?

A further question to consider

What are the 'barriers' and 'gateways' to meeting the challenge of inclusivity in your school, eg structures, pedagogy, practices and how certain 'knowledges' are valued above others?

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