

Inclusion as a 'way of life'

The research literature provides multiple definitions of inclusion which might serve to support the view that inclusion is difficult to define and implement. Furthermore within each community, there are also a variety of perspectives on the nature of inclusion. However, at its core, each definition or perspective shares the desire to create and support schools that include and engage all of their pupils in meaningful programmes of learning and teaching.

As schools embrace inclusion, they will be better able to collaborate to provide true pupil-centered learning within their communities. In this way, schools can collaborate to create a society that celebrates diversity in all its richness.

By working together, schools can create a practical definition of inclusion where each pupil is valued and supported to 'belong'. As pupils, parents and teachers listen to each others' views and concerns, the concept of inclusion can move from a theoretical framework to becoming a practical way of life for each of us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to sincerely thank the principals, teachers, parents and pupils of the nine schools participating in the Enniscorthy Education Initiative.

School

St. Senan's Primary School
St. Mary's Primary School
Gaelscoil Inis Coraithe
St. Aidan's Primary School
St. Patrick's Special School
St. Mary's CBS
Colaiste Bride
Enniscorthy Vocational College
Meán Scoil Inis Coraithe

Principal

Henry Goff
Margaret Jacob
Judy Heffernan
Peter Creedon
Michael Dunbar
John Ryan
Tom Sheridan
Seamus Murphy
Eoin Mac Craith

Contact Learning Support/Resource Teacher

Rose Mary Roche
Becky Atkinson / Celise Bretton O' Connor
Patrick Skelton / Mairead Thorpe
Gretta Carley
Catherine Redmond
Catherine Murray
Louise Murray
Cate Donohue
Eoin Mac Craith

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INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: DEVELOPING A PRACTICAL APPROACH



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What is an inclusive school?

In recent years, there have been significant developments in the education of pupils with special educational needs. Along with substantial legislative changes that support the development of inclusive schools, there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs enrolled in mainstream schools. However, the Department of Education and Science also recognizes the need for a continuum of provision for pupils with special educational needs, ranging from enrolment in special schools to enrolment in mainstream schools. Within the context of this policy, an inclusive school is one that supports all of its pupils to access, participate in and benefit from an appropriate education.

The Equality Authority (2005) defines the inclusive school as one which: '...respects, values and accommodates diversity across all nine grounds in the equality legislation – gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller Community. It seeks positive experiences, a sense of belonging and outcomes for all pupils across the nine grounds' (p.1).

In Ireland, there have been a number of initiatives that support inclusion at primary and post-primary level, such as schemes for schools in areas of educational disadvantage, support for the education of pupils from the Traveller Community, English-language support as well as guidance and support for the education of pupils with special educational needs.

Inclusion requires the transformation of learning contexts, which includes: '...the curriculum on offer, the assessment, recording and reporting of pupils' achievements, the decisions that are taken on the grouping of pupils within schools or classrooms, pedagogy and classroom practice, sport and leisure and recreational opportunities' (Mittler, 2000, p.2). Schools are responding purposefully to the challenges resulting from such a transformation in their planning and everyday practice. Although, schools vary considerably in their size, location and traditions, each school needs to develop an appropriate response to meeting the diverse needs of its pupils.

Features of inclusive schools

The Index for Inclusion was developed in the UK at the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE) in collaboration with the University of Manchester and University of Christ Church College, Canterbury (Booth et al., 2000). The Index for Inclusion provides a framework through which schools can evaluate their culture, policy and practice in relation to inclusion. The index is divided into a number of indicators representing 'statements of aspiration against which existing arrangements can be compared in order to set priorities for development' (Booth et al., 2000, p. 11). According to the index for inclusion, inclusive schools:

- value all pupils and staff equally;
- restructure their cultures, policies and practices so that they respond to pupil diversity;
- reduce barriers to learning and participation for all pupils;
- learn from their attempts to overcome barriers to pupil access and participation;
- emphasize the role of schools in building community and developing values, as well as in increasing achievement;
- foster mutually sustaining relationships between schools and communities.

A community perspective

The principals from all nine schools in Enniscorthy town have formed a partnership, the 'Enniscorthy Education Initiative' to explore issues of mutual concern relating to learning and teaching in their community. This partnership includes four primary schools, one special school and four post-primary schools and is facilitated by Co. Wexford Education Centre and the Special Education Support Service. As their first collaborative project, it was decided to explore perspectives on inclusion from individual pupils with special educational needs representing each school along with their parents and teachers. Extracts from the comments received are included below.

Parents

'Children with special needs often feel isolated and excluded from many activities, which in turn excludes the whole family. My son is fortunate to feel included in his school, however much support and work is required to make inclusive environments work. My son has little or no involvement in activities in our local area (as most of the activities involve being good at sport).'

'My daughter lacks self-confidence and has a low academic self-esteem! She gets very stressed out at times and commonly gets headaches from tension created by her emotions.'

'My son finds it very hard to concentrate and is very easily frustrated. He finds it difficult to cope with change in routine. He has extra help in some subjects and attends small group sessions for social skills training which has proved to be very helpful. There is a dedicated space he can go to when feeling overwhelmed. He has some very good friends who do not have Asperger's; he feels accepted despite his difference and this is very important to us as a family.'

Pupils

'The most of the teachers are nice. They have good subject choices like woodwork, metalwork and art. I like some of the normal subjects like science. Our teachers are doing team-building with us so I would be included in the school.'

'The teachers are understanding and helpful. You are not judged because of your differences. I feel included in my school because there are many activities to get included in.'

'I like Maths – you do loads of sums – you get to know that $2 + 2 = 4$. The teacher that comes in to help my teacher helps me – he shows us what to do in our copies and all.'

Teachers / Principals

'We believe that a student will benefit in a holistic environment. There are students with special educational needs in all of our classes. We are developing an SEN policy and developing IEPs. Our learning support team includes teachers from most subject areas.'

'Inclusion from the very beginning of school life nurtures and promotes a safe environment in which the natural process of learning and acquisition of social interactive skills can formulate and develop.'

'Inclusion enables the student's personality, career objectives and life skills to be developed in a specific individualised way. It makes the school think holistically about each child and their very individual needs which must be considered and addressed by the school. We try to offer a wide variety of teaching strategies and approaches to a very wide range of specific special needs. We endeavour to be open to new ideas, new teaching approaches and try to treat each student as an individual with individual needs/rights.'

Planning for inclusion

These perspectives offered by pupils, parents and teachers/principals can support schools to develop a practical definition of inclusion. The Pupil Inclusion Template below is based on a thematic analysis of all the comments submitted by pupils, parents and teachers/principals (Enniscorthy Education Initiative) and the 'Inclusion Planning Checklist' developed by Dennis Doherty and Kathy Freeman (Pathways International Consulting Pty Ltd.). This Pupil Inclusion Template highlights specific actions that a school might usefully adopt in a variety of areas, such as pupil welfare and community development. This template could be further developed to include specific actions along with appropriate timeframes. In this way, schools could create an action template that would assist them to include pupils with special educational needs.

Pupil Inclusion Template

Inclusive Action

1. Pupil Welfare:

- a. Preparing pupil for transitions
- b. Developing social skills
- c. Supporting the pastoral needs of pupil
- d. Supporting behavioural needs e.g. strategies to reduce stress
- e. Building peer relationships e.g. lunchtime support etc

2. Classroom Preparation:

- a. Supporting the teacher's understanding of the learning and social needs of pupil
- b. Collaborating with parents and specialists
- c. Communicating/collaborating with other teachers
- d. Communicating/collaborating with pupil's peers
- e. Preparing the physical environment e.g. seating, noise

3. School Environment:

- a. Facilitating emergency evacuation
- b. Providing appropriate access
- c. Providing suitable storage e.g. pupil locker
- d. Adapting school grounds
- e. Providing access to trips etc

4. Curriculum Adaptation:

- a. Differentiating curricular content
- b. Facilitating appropriate assessments
- c. Addressing pupil choices
- d. Adapting resources e.g. technology etc
- e. Facilitating additional supports

5. School Management:

- a. Timetabling
- b. Facilitating medications, therapies etc
- c. Conducting risk management
- d. Maintaining records
- e. Planning for emergencies

Inclusive Action

6. Professional Development:

- a. Promoting whole-staff responsibility
- b. Encouraging staff to accept diversity
- c. Supporting learning needs of staff
- d. Building capacity in relation to staff expertise
- e. Liaising with support services

7. Community Development:

- a. Promoting whole-school awareness
- b. Liaising with the Board of Management
- c. Building an inclusive ethos through shared extra-curricular activities
- d. Collaborating with relevant community groups
- e. Collaborating with other schools

8. Parental Involvement:

- a. Building trust
- b. Celebrating pupil success
- c. Supporting communication and collaboration
- d. Facilitating shared planning
- e. Supporting the family through informal meetings, classes etc

9. Ongoing Review:

- a. Developing learning targets
- b. Measuring success
- c. Reviewing learning targets
- d. Applying for reasonable accommodations as appropriate
- e. Exploring alternative forms of assessment

10. Additional Issues:

- a. Developing suitable extra-curricular activities
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.