Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Inclusive School Culture

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

“Inclusive education involves valuing and facilitating the full participation and belonging of everyone in all aspects of our education communities and systems.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Schools want guidance on how to establish and maintain an inclusive school culture that reflects inclusive values and is upheld by inclusive policies and practices. This tool is designed to assist school leaders and staff to reflect on the meaning of school culture. It presents ways in which schools can establish and sustain an inclusive school culture through building community and establishing inclusive values.

This tool considers inclusive culture at the whole of school level (rather than in individual classrooms) and looks at how school leaders can ‘set the tone’ for inclusive education.

Supporting inclusion school-wide and beyond into the school community means that students, families, friends, neighbourhoods, businesses and services all contribute to the inclusive culture and wellbeing of the school.

## Ideas

The idea we are exploring here is that it takes intentional effort and measures to create an inclusive school culture and an environment embedded in inclusive education. It may require an overall shift in thinking around every aspect of the school. Setting up an inclusive school culture requires commitment and robust leadership from school leaders who play a key role in setting inclusive values and practices. The message needs to be strong, consistent and upheld by everyone.

What is School Culture?

Nicole Eredics, inclusion classroom teacher and author of ‘Inclusion in action: Practical strategies to modify your curriculum’, defines school culture as “the collective norms, attitudes, ideals and behaviours that characterize a school and are demonstrated by school leadership, teachers, students and the larger community.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In an inclusive school, every student regardless of ability and background is included in every aspect of school life – in general education classes and in school events, activities, and excursions.

Indicators for Creating Inclusive Cultures

The Index for Inclusion (schools’ version) has been translated and/or adapted for use in many countries around the world and is a set of materials for inclusive school development. According to the Index for Inclusion, inclusive school culture involves building community and establishing inclusive values.[[3]](#footnote-3) The indicators of building community are:

* Everyone is made to feel welcome.
* Students help each other.
* Staff collaborate with each other.
* Staff and students treat one another with respect.
* There is a partnership between staff and parents/carers.
* Staff and governors work well together.
* All local communities are involved in the school.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The indicators of establishing inclusive values are:

* There are high expectations for all students.
* Staff, governors, students and parents/carers share a philosophy of inclusion.
* Students are equally valued.
* Staff and students treat one another as human beings as well as occupants of a ‘role’.
* Staff seek to remove barriers to learning and participation in all aspects of the school.
* The school strives to minimise discriminatory practice.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## *Inclusive Schools Start with ‘Yes’*

'Gatekeeping' is when a limitation is placed on students’ access to general educational environments, or participation in the broader activities within the school; it can take many forms including when mainstream educational institutions steer students living with disability to a segregated setting (such as a special school or special education unit).[[6]](#footnote-6) Clearly, inclusive schools do not engage in gatekeeping and have policies and staff training in place to avoid gatekeeping, which is illegal under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). Inclusive schools welcome all school-age children regardless of ability or diversity and provide a rich and meaningful education for all children in general education classrooms with appropriate modifications and supports. According to Eredics, inclusive schools start by saying ‘yes’ and the premise is:

* ‘Yes, we will educate every child together as peers.’
* ‘Yes, every child is welcome and a valued member of our school.’
* ‘Yes, we will adapt and modify our approach so that every child has a chance to learn.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Action

According to All Means All, the nationwide multi-stakeholder alliance for inclusive education,

Schools that have inclusive school cultures and adopt structures, systems and methodologies that are aimed at responding to the diverse needs of ALL its students – like “universal design for learning” and differentiated teaching – generally don’t need to make as many adjustments to accommodate students with disability or diverse learning needs because they have already done the work to establish a school climate, premises and processes that assume their participation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Schools want guidance on how to establish and maintain an inclusive school culture that reflects inclusive values and is upheld by inclusive policies and practices.

Eredics proposes several ways to cultivate an inclusive school culture:

* the school’s mission statements
* the language used in the school building and documents
* creating thoughtful school schedules and
* accessible events, activities, excursions and celebrations of achievements.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The following is a summary of Eredics’ ideas for setting up inclusive school cultures, however further information can be found in her book ‘Inclusion in action: Practical strategies to modify your curriculum’.

School staff are encouraged to assess whether these practices are in operation at their site and whether they reflect inclusive values.

## *School’s Mission Statements*

A clearly written and well-worded mission statement is a useful tool for reinforcing an inclusive school culture.[[10]](#footnote-10) These statements usually set out the values, goals and purpose of the school. It is best practice for staff, students, families and governors to be involved in co-designing the mission statement ensuring all school community members feel a sense of ownership for the mission. The mission statement should also be well-known and visible being at the forefront of people’s minds and guiding actions across the school. Schools need to induct and train all educators and administrative staff about their mission, so all staff are familiar with it and understand its relevance to their work. School staff, students and families should be able to explain the school vision and how it informs the way the school operates.

## *Language*

A commitment to inclusive language is an important attribute of a modern, diverse and inclusive school.

Inclusive language is language that is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. It is also language that doesn’t deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from being seen as part of a group. (p. 3)[[11]](#footnote-11)

Inclusive language is understood, accepted, and used consistently across the school and broader community.

In their ‘Inclusive language guidelines’, the Tasmanian Department of Education states,

There is no place in written or spoken communication for uninformed, prejudiced, stereotypical or insensitive references to people based on their actual or perceived characteristics or membership of particular groups. (p. 3)[[12]](#footnote-12)

Inclusive schools ensure their staff, students and families understand their responsibility to use inclusive language, that shows courtesy and respect for diversity, in all forms of communication.

It is useful for staff and students to discuss what is and isn’t inclusive language; this includes translating complex concepts and ideas to plain English.

An approach used by a government primary school in the *Inclusive School Communities Project* was getting students and staff to define and describe ‘inclusion’ so the whole school community had a shared understanding of inclusion. The idea is that the expressions used by students and staff to explain inclusion are displayed broadly around the school in classrooms and on building walls.

## *Thoughtful School Schedules*

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills in the UK reported that development towards effective inclusion was frustrated by rigid timetabling, inflexible staffing and lack of inventiveness in some schools.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Inclusive schools have flexible timetabling ensuring it suits all students at the school.

The paper ‘Timetabling and other practical ideas: Some possibilities arising from the Review of the syllabuses for the senior phase of learning’, commissioned by the Queensland Studies Authority, discusses the importance of flexible timetabling:

The positive view is that the flexibility not only provides opportunities for students, it also has the potential to better cater for teachers’ needs. It is important to take a positive view when developing timetabling models, and to take the working patterns of teachers strongly into account. (p. 28)[[14]](#footnote-14)

The ‘Good teaching: Inclusive teaching for students with disability’ guide, published by the Tasmanian Department of Education, recommends ‘Use a whole class visual timetable to represent schedules and programmes’ and ‘Use individual visual timetables for students who need them’ (p. 19).[[15]](#footnote-15) The guide also suggests that timetables in both words and pictures caters for all students.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Accessible Events, Activities, Excursions and Celebrations of Achievements

Inclusive culture is supported through schoolwide opportunities, events and activities for students.[[17]](#footnote-17) “In an inclusive school, events and activities appeal to a diverse group of students and are made accessible to everyone.”[[18]](#footnote-18) These events and activities provide students with opportunities to assume leadership roles and demonstrate skills and talents that may not be apparent in classroom settings.

Events and activities also provide opportunities for staff, students and families to come together building connection and community.

The most inclusive school communities are ones that encourage parents, students, and teachers to come together and give back to the community. From participating in events to supporting local causes, these activities will bring everyone closer together, and build a sense of belonging.[[19]](#footnote-19)

School leaders are encouraged to run the ‘inclusion radar’ over every school event and activity to ensure all participants are genuinely included and their access and engagement needs are met. Questions to prompt this thinking:

1. Can everyone attend, participate and contribute?
2. Are there any individuals or groups who we are excluding or who may find it harder to participate?
3. Do we have an accessible venue and equipment and appropriate supports for all participants?

“Nurturing an inclusive school community is about promoting a shared vision of student success - where every child receives the best chance to grow and achieve their goals.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

There are other ways for educators, leaders, teachers, and parents, to encourage an inclusive and supportive school community. Some of the ideas suggested by SkoolBag, Australia’s leading school communication app, are introduced below:

Effective Communication and Opportunities for Dialogue

“One of the most important ways to build a strong and supportive school network is to communicate: communicate effectively, communicate promptly, and communicate often.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Clear, open, honest and timely communication among school leaders and staff, staff and students, staff and families, and between students is vital to a positive school climate. Students should feel safe to speak up to school leaders and staff when something isn’t going well at school or they would like something to be different.

School leadership will need to put effort into communication channels and norms, including the use of digital platforms and apps for communication between parents and teachers. Schools will also need to address any considerations, concerns, and conflicts in a fair and timely manner. A school that welcomes input and dialogue ensures everyone feels safe, included, and able to have their voice heard.[[22]](#footnote-22) Inclusive schools provide their staff, students and families with formal opportunities to provide their feedback and suggestions, ensuring this is listened to and acted upon.

Share and Celebrate Successes

Acknowledging the efforts and achievements (academic and non-academic) of students, as well as staff, contributes to creating a positive school culture that is based on strengths and growth mindset. “Celebrate the good times, whether big or small, and encourage everyone in the community to share in these moments together.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This can be done through school newsletters, assemblies, merit awards, class parties, special lunches, and family events that bring staff, students and families together to connect and share. Inclusive schools support and celebrate students’ progress and success including when they engage in actions that enact school values.

Student voice and leadership is another key practice of inclusive and supportive school culture. Ideas to engage and empower students to contribute to their school communities are explored in the tool titled ‘Students Leading Inclusive Schools’.

## More Information

Many of the ideas discussed in this tool are drawn from ‘Inclusion in Action: Practical Strategies to Modify your Curriculum’ by inclusion classroom teacher, Nicole Eredics. <https://products.brookespublishing.com/Inclusion-in-Action-P1050.aspx>

Fact Sheet 4 - Transformation to inclusive education: the next steps published by Children and Young People with Disability Australia. <https://www.cyda.org.au/inclusion-in-education>

‘Good Teaching: Inclusive Teaching for Students with Disability’, published September 2015, by the Tasmanian Department of Education, as part of a Good Teaching suite of resources. This publication has been developed for teachers who have not worked with students with disability. It is a practical support resource to give them more confidence in this area. <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Good-Teaching-Inclusive-Teaching-for-Students-with-Disability.pdf>

‘Inclusive Language Guidelines’, published December 2019, by the Tasmanian Department of Education. <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Guidelines-for-Inclusive-Language.pdf>

## Acknowledgement

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