Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Report – School Student Consultation

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

This tool is a summary of the full report on school student consultation conducted as part of the Inclusive School Communities Project. The key recommendations presented in this tool are relevant to all schools in Australia/worldwide and offer a starting point for schools wanting to move to an inclusive education framework. You are encouraged to visit the Inclusive School Communities website and read the full report that expands on the content in this tool <https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/news/report-school-student-consultation>.

Two focus group sessions were held with students at a South Australian secondary school in February 2020. Each session had roughly 15 participants from years 9-12 and some students participated in both sessions. Most of the participants had a diagnosed disability and/or self-identified as living with disability or an additional need. About half of participants had been in recently dismantled smaller (segregated) classes and had only recently returned to mainstream classes, whereas the other half had been in mainstream classes throughout their entire time at this school. The focus group sessions were facilitated by two School Mentors who are young people living with disability from diverse professional backgrounds, with support from the Project Leader.

The first session centered on the following questions:

1. What does ‘belonging’ mean to you at school?
2. What does your school do to help you feel included and valued?

The second session centered on the following questions:

1. What could your school do differently or better to make you feel included and valued?
2. What are the barriers or challenges for students living with disability or students who have additional learning needs at your school?

Responses were grouped into three main, but interconnected, themes: access, relationships with peers and relationships with school staff.

Overall, participants in the sessions acknowledged that school staff implemented strategies to support the learning and inclusion of all students. However, participants suggested that strategies implemented often were not sufficient by themselves and additional strategies are required. Also, it appeared that the school had no peer-led strategies to increase inclusion and this was clearly needed.

One student said the school staff needed to be *“Not necessarily changing everything they are going to do but making some differences so that other people can be included.”* This comment was regarding school sports day, but it can apply to school access broadly, opportunity to engage with peers and student learning.

# Key Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the data from the student focus groups (in no particular order):

1. School staff need to obtain information on physical access to school grounds, school buildings and classrooms for students with permanent or temporary disability. Access audits and student surveys are two ways of obtaining this information. Any physical access issues should be remedied with application of the universal design principles, where possible.
2. When planning school activities and events, school staff need to ensure the activities and events are accessible and inclusive for students living with disability. Research (and Purple Orange’s work in youth engagement and leadership and work with schools) indicates that involving students living with disability in planning committees for school activities and events is a good strategy to ensure access and inclusion needs are considered and catered to.
3. Students living with disability should be educated alongside their peers without disability, to promote inclusion and ensure social cohesion among the school community.
4. Teachers should undertake professional development in understanding and responding to the needs of students living with disability. In Australia, this falls under the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers ‘1: Know students and how they learn’. Teacher aides should undertake similar professional development around the needs of students living with disability (as relevant to their role and responsibilities).
5. School staff (e.g., school leaders, counsellors/pastoral care workers) should frequently check in with students living with disability (and students who require extra attention for other reasons e.g., home-life/family concerns, risk of social isolation). Students should be encouraged to discuss learning and personal matters to ensure students receive the attention and support they need.
6. School staff need to create opportunities for peer-led inclusion for students living with disability (and other differences) with consultation and input from students. Peer mentoring and tutoring are well -evidenced peer-led strategies.
7. Diversity training for students should be incorporated into student learning to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity among students.
8. School staff should ensure consistency regarding classroom rules and supports e.g., consistency in the provision of breaks during classes.
9. Schools need to have an anti-bullying policy/plan and ensure that any punishments given out to perpetrators do not jeopardise the inclusion, safety and learning of the students being bullied. Research (and Purple Orange’s work in youth engagement and leadership and work with schools) indicates that students should be involved in the design, implementation, and review of anti-bullying policies/plans.

Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Leeanne Marshall, an autistic young person. Leeanne holds a Master of Teaching (Special Education) (Secondary) and is currently undertaking a Master of Disability Policy and Practice. Leeanne is on the project steering group and is an Inclusive School Mentor. This tool was edited by JFA Purple Orange.

