Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 1: Unpacking Definitions and Concepts to Build School Inclusion

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 the first in a series of four, written by Dr Leanne Longfellow drawing on her experience in advocating for family members with disability, her research and 30-year teaching career with students with disability.

This first tool is an introduction to terminology and concepts relevant to disability and inclusion. It is designed to assist school staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff) to understand the various perspectives of disability and the importance of countering ableism through using Universal Design for Learning (UDL)[[1]](#footnote-1) and a social justice perspective within the curricula.

The information contained in this tool is based on a human rights perspective to inform educational decision-making regarding students living with disability. School staff may be unfamiliar with these concepts as they are drawn from the fields of sociology and disability studies. School staff need to have shared beliefs on what inclusion is and how this can be achieved for it to be successful and for all students to be genuinely included, regardless of ability and identity. This tool contains:

* An exploration of the definition of disability
* An introduction to the concept of ableism
* How these concepts can be used to create a culture of inclusion

## Ideas

***An Exploration of the Definition of Disability***

School staff need to be aware of the numerous international, national and state-based legal frameworks that guide contemporary understanding of disability. The key documents used within the Australian education system are the Disability Standards for Education (the Standards)[[2]](#footnote-2) and its overarching legislation, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)[[3]](#footnote-3). School staff should be familiar with these documents and use them as a reference point. Read the tool on ‘An Introduction to Policies Applying to Students Living with Disability’ for more information.

The definition of disability within the DDA is broad and includes physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological and learning disabilities, physical, disfigurement and disease-causing organisms, such as the HIV virus[[4]](#footnote-4). The DDA covers disabilities that people have now, had in the past, may have in the future or which they are believed to have. This definition is open to interpretation resulting in a range of understandings of disability. Contemporary perspectives draw on an understanding of disability that may differ from the way schools have traditionally viewed disability. This definition highlights the physical and attitudinal barriers imposed by society upon people living with disability. These different definitions and understandings of disability can be represented by models which are explored within a tool by the same author, ‘Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 2: The Models of Disability’. It is important for school staff to be cognizant of ableism in the school context and understand how definitions and legalisation can support a human rights-based framework of inclusion.

***An Introduction to the Concept of Ableism***

Ableism refers to “discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities”[[5]](#footnote-5). It stems from deeply rooted (and outdated beliefs) about health, productivity, beauty and the value of human life leading to negative attitudes about disability and the belief that people living with disability are inferior. It is like racism where one race is believed to be superior to another or sexism where one sex, typically men, is believed to be superior to another.

Ableism is evident in schools where ability-based segregation occurs, despite research that inclusive education results in improved outcomes for all students (see A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education[[6]](#footnote-6)). When students living with disability are segregated due to a misguided belief that they need to be remediated or fixed, it leads to the marginalisation of students living with disability and a less effective system for everyone. In an article about ableism in education, Hehir asserts that "the pervasiveness of . . . ableist assumptions in the education of children with disabilities not only reinforces prevailing prejudices against disability but may very well contribute to low levels of educational attainment and employment."[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Actions

It is helpful to facilitate a conversation with school staff about the definition of disability and the concept of ableism. By talking about disability and ableism, school staff will be better able to understand why inclusion is important and lead them to think about how they can create a culture of inclusion in their classroom. The information contained in this tool may be used as part of their staff’s reflective practice and internal professional learning in individual (e.g., staff supervision) or group settings (e.g., staff meeting, professional development meetings).

There are steps that schools can take to move in the direction of inclusion. Firstly, school staff should not focus on a student’s disability to the exclusion of all else. From an early age, many people with disabilities encounter the view that disability is negative and tragic and that “overcoming” disability is the only valued result[[8]](#footnote-8). Overcoming disability is not the objective but rather empowering school staff with the knowledge they need to recognise and take disability into account. This can be done by performing activities in ‘different’ ways that might be more efficient for students living with disability —such as reading Braille, using sign language, using text-to-speech software to read, changing school uniforms, using audio and visual resources, audio exams, written project assessments instead of timed exams and so on. Schools must look for ways to give students living with disability the supports, skills, and opportunities needed to have a quality education. It might be as simple as offering alternatives.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, Standard 1.6 ‘Strategies to support full participation of students with disability’ refers to “… teaching strategies that support participation and learning of students with disability” [[9]](#footnote-9). Schools are recommended to incorporate two key approaches, UDL and a social justice in their pedagogical framework.

***Universal Design for Learning***

UDL is an approach to curriculum development and delivery that aims to minimise barriers to learning and thereby to maximize the accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of learning for all students. Its underlying principles complement inclusionary practices in the classroom and the engagement of all students, including students with disability. A UDL framework is vital so all classrooms are accessible by providing a flexible curriculum and catering for a range of needs, sometimes using accommodations or adjustments [[10]](#footnote-10). This is achieved by providing multiple means of representation, options for action and expression and engagement that works better for everyone, not just for students living with disability. The UDL Guidelines can be used to design learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners[[11]](#footnote-11). For an introduction to universal design in education settings and the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to curricula and eliminating barriers, read the tool on ‘Accessibility and Universal Design’.

***Social Justice Framework***

Defining and developing a set of social justice principles is an essential foundation for good practice in schools.

Derman-Sparks and Edwards in their writing about anti-bias education suggest focussing on four areas:

* Each student will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride and positive social identities.
* Each student will experience comfort and joy with human diversity, have accurate language for human differences and form deep caring human differences.
* Each student will increasingly recognise unfairness, have language to describe unfairness.
* Each student will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act with others or alone against prejudice and/or discriminatory action[[12]](#footnote-12)

Derman-Sparks and Edwards[[13]](#footnote-13) offer practical suggestions within each area. Schools are encouraged to review these four areas and their suggestions as part of incorporating a social justice framework into their school’s pedagogy.

## More Information

All about UDL <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XS6CF_IzaUk>

Ideas on implementing strategies in the classroom to develop students’ self-determination <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315114089_Teachers'_views_of_student's_self-determination_and_citizenship_skills>

UDL Guidelines <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/more/downloads>

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Leanne presents researched based professional learning to support teachers, assistants, other professionals and parents on inclusive practice <https://inclusiveeducationplanning.com.au/>

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13. Ibid.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-13)