Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 4:

Reflecting on Culture and Assumptions about Disability

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 final in a series of four related tools 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.

Schools are encouraged to support their staff to examine their assumptions about disability, discuss relevant definitions and concepts, and reflect on the models of disability. This tool is designed to help school staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff) reflect on their beliefs about students living with disability and to discover which model of disability their worldview is most aligned with. The questionnaire below can be used to stimulate critical self-reflection among staff and with clear guidance and support, a shared understanding of the school’s view towards diversity and inclusion.

We recommend this tool is read in conjunction with the three other tools by the same author:

* ‘Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 1: Unpacking Definitions’
* ‘Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 2: The Models of Disability’
* ‘Exploring Disability and Inclusion Tool 3: Applying the Social Model of Disability to School Inclusion’

## Ideas

The questionnaire below is informed by Rosalyn Benjamin Darling’s research on disability and identity[[1]](#footnote-1). This tool is intended to provide an opportunity for school staff (most importantly, educators and teacher aides) to reflect on their culture and assumptions related to diversity, disability and inclusion.

## Actions

## A school may use this questionnaire as part of their staff’s reflective practice and internal professional learning. It may be used in individual (e.g., staff supervision) or group settings (i.e., staff meeting/ professional development meetings) however a capable facilitator is required to create safety for participants and stimulate open discussion. ‘Handout 1: Questionnaire’ should be provided and completed by participants first and ‘Handout 2: Unpacking the myths’ second.

Handout 1: Questionnaire (includes guidance and instructions)

Please read each statement and tick the box that represents your level of agreement. When completed, total each section and refer to ‘Handout 2: Unpacking the myths’ for an evidence-based response to each statement.

This is a way of developing a critical consciousness of your perception of students living with disability. Each of us has our history and way of viewing the world, which is often taken for granted and assumed as fact. However, our worldview is influenced by social and cultural factors and norms and is often limited by biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions.

Your response to each question allows you to reflect on your values and beliefs regarding the education of students living with disability. As you work through these statements you may become aware of your own privilege and feel uncomfortable about the inequityexperienced by students living with disability. However, this activity is not designed to label people as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but to acknowledge that everyone has been exposed to ableism. This is an opportunity to recognise and analyse cultural influences and assumptions and interrupt these in order to develop a vision for a socially-just, inclusive education system.

| Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly  Agree |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Students with disability have little in common with students without disability. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Students with intellectual disabilities receive a better education in ‘special schools’ or ‘special classes’. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. The financial cost of making schools accessible is too high. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. I feel sorry for students with disability. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Professionals know what is best for students with disability. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Students with disabilities will not make friends in general education. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Inclusion has a negative impact on students without disabilities as their learning can be compromised by the presence of a student with disability. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Inclusion is a fad that legitimises a marketplace for inclusive programs. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Teachers do not have the skills to teach students with disability. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Students with disabilities will be bullied in general education settings. |  |  |  |  |  |
| What is your tally in each area? |  |  |  |  |  |

Handout 2: Unpacking the myths

If most of these questions were answered in the ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’ category, you are drawing on a Social Model of Disability to make sense of the world around you. It is likely that you view disability as a social problem rather than an intrinsic issue. If your answers were largely in the ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ areas, this suggests you are probably viewing the world through the Medical Model of Disability. This doesn’t make you a bad person, but, like many people in society, it may mean you are carrying misconceptions and stereotypical beliefs about the education of students living with disability, and which you will need to address to strengthen your capacity to teach a diverse classroom.

Below you will find responses to the statements in the questionnaire based on the current research:

| Factual Statements |
| --- |
| 1. Students with disability and those without disabilities have far more in common than their differences. When an undue focus is placed on difference, the many attributes that students have in common tends to be overlooked. |
| 1. Evidence-based research indicates that students with disability have improved academic and social outcomes through an inclusive approach. |
| 1. It is a myth that inclusion has a high financial cost. In reality, segregated education fails to utilise resources efficiently by asking students to fit into what is already prepared but may not meet their needs. Instead, inclusive practice redirects resources to students in a cost-effective manner. |
| 1. Many students with disability find their disability identity offers self-worth and dignity and they reject the notion of pity. |
| 1. Professional knowledge is helpful for students with disabilities, but when it is delivered without acknowledgement of the expertise of the person, issues of power enter the relationship. |
| 1. It can be challenging for students with disability to make friends, but this is not due to intrinsic qualities within the student, it is due to an environment that does not facilitate friendships. |
| 1. All students have improved outcomes in inclusive settings. |
| 1. The opposite is true. There is a thriving marketplace based on therapies and rehabilitation of disability that is fuelled by the misguided belief that segregated education is effective. |
| 1. All teachers have the skills to teach all students, you do not require a degree in special education to be an effective educator. However, teachers should be supported to cater for diversity in their classrooms. |
| 1. There is a myth that segregated contexts are safer for students with disability. However, research indicates that bullying occurs in segregated as well as general education settings. |

## *How Can These Concepts be Utilised to Create a Culture of Inclusion?*

This questionnaire is a starting point to develop an awareness of the unequal structures within society that are reflected within schools. Once this is acknowledged we can start to examine the unconscious attitudes that result in segregated education for students living with disability.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, Standard 1.6 ‘Strategies to support full participation for students with disability’[[2]](#footnote-2) inform the application of concepts explored within this tool in a school context. The strategies for implementation of these concepts are interconnected with the strategies mentioned in the previous tools. Educators are encouraged to incorporate citizenship, self- determination and self-advocacy within the curricula to facilitate movement from a medical to social model, assisting the inclusion of students living with disability by providing choice and control.

This requires educators to explicitly teach:

* choice-making
* problem-solving
* goal setting
* leadership skills
* self-advocacy

Acquiring these skills is important for autonomy, independence, citizenship and belonging of all students and facilitating inclusion through access and full participation across school and community settings.

## More Information

Article written by Founder and Director of Starting With Julius, Catia Malaquias ‘3 Myths of “Special Education” Thoughts for Parents’ <http://www.startingwithjulius.org.au/3-myths-of-special-education-thoughts-for-parents/>

Excerpt from Rosalyn Benjamin Darling’s book ‘Disability and identity: Negotiating self in a changing society’ examining disability and identity including the shifting forces that have shaped individual and societal understandings of ability and impairment across time <https://www.rienner.com/uploads/5d1270369d5c0.pdf>

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>

School Inclusion – From Theory to Practice is an online platform created by inclusive educator and school leader, Loren Swancutt to share and unpack school-level design, implementation and leadership processes that support the realisation of inclusive education in Australian schools and school systems. <https://school-inclusion.com/>

## Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Dr Leanne Longfellow, Director of Inclusive Education Planning and edited by JFA Purple Orange.

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



1. Darling, R. B. (2013). *Disability and identity: Negotiating self in a changing society.* Colorado: Lynne Riemer Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2011). Australian professional standards for teachers. Retrieved from

   https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/apst-resources/australian\_professional\_standard\_for\_teachers\_final.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)