

# Is Your School Inclusive?

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*This article is from the website of Dr. Paula Kluth. It, along with many others on inclusive schooling, differentiated instruction, and literacy can be found at [www.PaulaKluth.com](http://www.PaulaKluth.com). Visit now to read her Tip of the Day, read dozens of free articles, and learn more about supporting diverse learners in K-12 classrooms.*

Inclusive schooling is an educational movement that stresses interdependence and independence, views all students as capable, and values a sense of community. Further, it supports civil rights and equity in the classroom:

[inclusive schooling] propels a critique of contemporary school culture and thus, encourages practitioners to reinvent what can be and should be to realize more humane, just and democratic learning communities. Inequities in treatment and educational opportunity are brought to the forefront, thereby fostering attention to human rights, respect for difference and value of diversity. (Udvari-Solner, 1997, p. 142)

Like Udvari-Solner (1997), I define inclusive education as something that supports and benefits all learners. If “inequities in treatment and educational opportunity are brought to the forefront”, for instance, teachers and community members might question practices such as tracking and standardized testing that segregate, stratify, and often harm students. If schools create “more humane, just, and democratic learning communities” all students will be seen as important members of the school including students from all racial and ethnic groups, students new to the community, students using English as a second language, and students who identify as gay and lesbian. Clearly, inclusion is more than a set of strategies or practices, it is an educational orientation that embraces differences and values the uniqueness that each learner brings to the classroom.

## **Characteristics of Inclusive Schools**

While every inclusive school will have a different look and feel than any other, schools dedicated to serving all students will share some characteristics. Specifically, these schools will have committed leadership, democratic classrooms, reflective teachers, a supportive culture, responsive and relevant curriculum, and responsive instruction.

### **Committed Leadership**

Administrators, school board members, and teachers in leadership positions (e.g., department chairs) play a critical role in an inclusive school by articulating a vision

for the school, building support for the vision, and working with the school community to implement strategies that make the school successful. In fact, Trump and Hange (1996) found in their study that administrative leadership was considered to be the greatest support or the greatest obstacle to the success and development of inclusive schooling.

Administrators and other leaders help students, staff, and the local community understand inclusion as a philosophy or ideology that will permeate the school; they help staff members as new ways of “doing business” are adopted; they provide encouragement and support as teachers take risks and try new approaches; they educate families and community members about the school’s beliefs and their inclusive mission; and they help to celebrate day-to-day successes and problem-solve day-to-day struggles.

### **Democratic Classrooms**

Democratic schooling is an approach to education that honors individuality, respects student voice, and asks all school community members (including teachers, students, support staff, and family members) to be responsible, to contribute, and to participate in learning and in teaching.

One characteristic of democratic schools is equality. In a democratic school, all students and all staff members are treated with respect and dignity; all voices are honored and all contributions are seen as valuable. Another common characteristic is collaboration. Students in democratic schools are connected to each other, to the surrounding neighborhood, and to the broader community through partnerships with business, volunteer relationships, and curriculum and instruction that relates to real-life experience and student interests.

Students in democratic classrooms often share ideas, make rules, help to create curriculum, and make decisions about their learning and their environment. In addition, they often direct their own learning experiences.

A teacher interested in making their classroom more democratic might ask the following questions:

- Who determines classroom rules? Are rules constructed collaboratively by teacher and students?;
- What does the classroom environment look like? When a visitor glances around the room, does the space appear to belong to the teacher (e.g., all work displayed is chosen by the teacher) or does it seem to be a space shared by the classroom community?;
- Can students question decisions made by the teacher? and
- Who makes decisions regarding curriculum? Does the teacher make all of the decisions about topics covered, materials used, and ways in which instruction is delivered or are students consulted?

## **Supportive School Culture**

In simple terms, culture is the “way things are done” in a certain place. In other words, culture involves the norms, expectations, or habits of an environment. Oftentimes, the culture of a school is apparent to visitors the moment they walk in the front door. Outsiders can learn a lot about a school by the kinds of banners or signs that cover the walls, the types of teacher conversations taking place in the lounge, and the ways in which students are engaged.

If the culture of a school is open, accepting, and caring, inclusive schooling can thrive. However, if the school culture is competitive, individualistic, and, authoritative, teachers will find it impossible to grow inclusive schooling.

Cultivating a safe, positive, and robust school culture may be the most difficult piece of creating an inclusive school, but it is also, perhaps, the most critical piece. School leaders and educators concerned with creating an inclusive school culture might invite parents and community members to visit classrooms, help with projects, and serve as resources; give students opportunities to teach and lead; use suggestion boxes and implement suggestions from all stakeholder groups in the school; and make time for school celebrations small and large.

## **Engaging & Relevant Curricula**

Teachers in inclusive classrooms must design curriculum and instruction and engineer classroom activities that are personally and culturally appropriate, engaging for a range of learning styles, and suitable for learners with various talents and interests. This is critical not only for students with unique learning or social needs, but for every student in the classroom as they grow and learn not just from the daily curriculum, but from the ways in which schools respond to difference.

In inclusive classrooms, units of study must be relevant, themes of investigation must be interesting and content must be appropriately challenging. Classroom materials should also be meaningful to a wide variety of students. The classroom library must include books written by and about people with individual and group differences, for example. Further, classroom lessons should include information about the diversity students represent. For instance, a teacher might provide information about FDR’s physical disabilities or General Patton’s learning differences during a lesson on World War II.

## **Responsive Instruction**

Teachers in inclusive classrooms are concerned about reaching and motivating all learners. In the best cases, they are versed in adapting materials, lesson structures, instructional arrangements, curricular goals and outcomes, and teaching

techniques and can meet both the academic and social needs of students. A teacher concerned with responsive instruction might create any of the following opportunities for students with diverse learning needs:

- engineer a cross-age mentoring relationship for a student who needs extra assistance;
- give select students opportunities to use manipulatives on some math worksheets;
- provide personal checklists to those who need help with organization;
- provide opportunities to pace in the back of the classroom during lectures and class discussions for a student needing movement;
- create large-print textbooks for students with low vision; and/or
- allow students to design their own assessments for a particular unit.

### **Inclusive Schooling: Theory to Practice**

So how can a parent or teacher determine if their school is inclusive? In other words, how do the aforementioned principles translate into the daily work of schools? The following indicators can serve as a guide for those interested in evaluating or developing an inclusive school. In an inclusive school, you should see:

- a school philosophy or mission statement that supports inclusive education;
- staff development opportunities that reflect an inclusive philosophy and inclusive practices;
- a school leadership team that promotes inclusion through written materials, presentations, staffing decisions, and building design;
- teachers using language that reflects the philosophy of inclusive education (e.g., "our students" vs. "your students" or "my students");
- students with disabilities attending their neighborhood schools (the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability);
- students being educated in classrooms with their same-age peers;
- students with a wide range of needs and abilities being educated throughout the school (not concentrated in one or two classrooms);
- all students meaningfully participating in curriculum and instruction;
- a range of curricular adaptations and modifications offered to all learners;
- students moving with peers to subsequent grades in school;
- students with disabilities having the same school day (length of day, time of arrival and departure) as those without disabilities;
- students using the same transportation as students without disabilities;
- students using the same school spaces (e.g., lockers, cafeteria) and schedules as students without disabilities;
- all students having opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities;
- curricular and extracurricular activities encouraging interactions between peers with and without disabilities;
- all teachers collaborating to address all students' IEP objectives;

- all teachers collaborating to ensure effective instructional strategies (e.g., active learning, small-group instruction) are implemented to support diverse learners;
- all teachers promoting self-determination (e.g. student-led IEP meetings);
- related and supplemental services (e.g., mobility, speech) being provided through a trans-disciplinary team approach; and
- special educators, general educators, paraprofessionals, and related services professionals co-planning and co-teaching.

Educators charged with creating change in their schools can review this list and determine areas of need. Once these areas are identified, a plan for school improvement can be developed and strategies can be designed to create change and inspire progress. For instance, if the school needs help developing lesson plans that meet the needs of all learners, staff development resources might be designated for this purpose. Or if teachers are not currently engaged in co-teaching arrangements, a few educators might visit other schools that do engage in this practice. Other strategies that can be used to move a school forward with practices and a philosophy that supports all learners include:

- forming an in-house committee to target areas of change and move the inclusive schooling agenda forward;
- working with local and national consultants to map out strategies for change and/or to learn new ideas related to inclusive schooling;
- assembling a teacher book club related to inclusive schooling;
- sending teachers to local and national conferences related to inclusive schooling;
- partnering with other schools across the district, county, and state to learn about inclusion and share ideas;
- visiting inclusive schools; and
- asking teachers to try new practices related to inclusive schooling (e.g., co-teaching, differentiating instruction) and inviting them to share these experiences with others.

## Conclusions

No matter where any individual school is on their journey to inclusion, evaluation of “where we are” and “where we are going” can be very helpful. By using the definition, characteristics, and indicators shared in this article, schools should be equipped to ask themselves, “Are we inclusive?” and begin to craft strategies to get all students the placement, supports, and opportunities they deserve.

## References

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