What is Inclusion?

PARENTS AND CARERS OF STUDENTS

What is Inclusion?



Proven benefits of inclusion:

- Better literacy and numeracy skills.
- Stronger friendships in both school and home environments.
- Improved spoken language skills.
- A greater level of independence into teenager years and adulthood.
- Improved skills of communication, particularly in conversation and negotiation.
- Greater world knowledge, including "real-world" skills.

Introduction

All children in Australia have the right to an inclusive education. There are many ideas and philosophies about inclusive education and what this looks like, and unfortunately there are some misconceptions too.

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training has focused heavily on inclusive education in recent years, stating that:

> ***'All students, including students with disability, are welcomed by their school and supported to reach their full potential.'*** (NSWDET, 2021).

But what does inclusion **really** look like?

Inclusion is: Respecting and celebrating diversity

An inclusive school is not just a school which accepts diversity, but celebrates it.

This includes race, gender, sexuality, social and economic background, religion, and ability. A truly inclusive school is a place where the differences between individuals in the community are seen to make that community stronger through diversity.

Society as a whole is a diverse place, made up of many different people with unique strengths and abilities. If schools are a place where students learn how to interact and thrive in the world, our classrooms need to reflect this diversity.

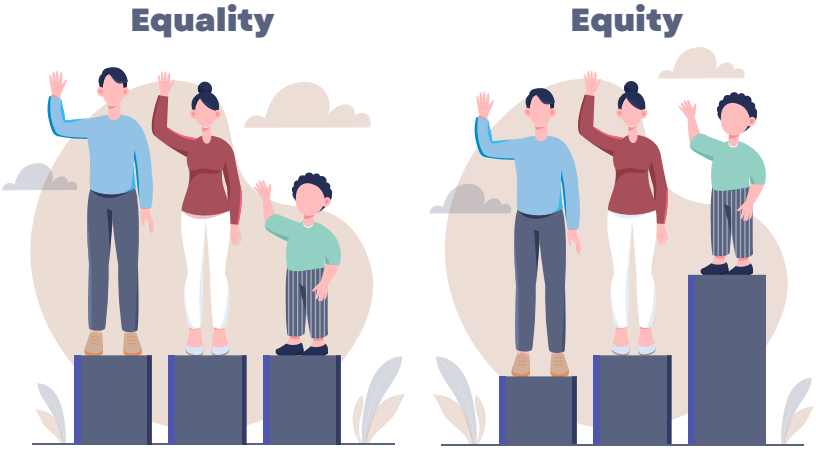
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Inclusion is: A partnership

Collaboration is the key to a successful inclusive education. Relationships built on trust and respect between the child, the family and the school will ensure that children not only learn, but thrive.

All parents are the experts on their child. By the time students begin school, parents have had years to learn about their child's strengths and challenges.

An inclusive school will be proactive in seeking to understand and harness these strengths to assist all children to succeed. This may mean educators need to develop a deeper understanding of the general characteristics of certain diagnoses while understanding that each child is uniquely different.



The difference between "equality" and "equity".

Inclusion is: Creating an environment where all children can succeed

A common misconception about inclusive education is that the learning environment looks identical for every child. This is the opposite of inclusion, as it does not consider the diverse and unique needs of each individual in that environment.

Consider, for example, a student with a visual impairment. It might seem fair to rotate seating positions on the floor so that each child has a chance to sit at the front of the class, and at the back of the class.

While this is **equal**, it is not **equitable**, because the student with a visual impairment will not have the same opportunity to learn.

The same is true for our students with Down syndrome. An equitable classroom is not a "one size fits all" classroom where everything looks the same for all students.

This might mean that all students will sometimes learn with the whole class, with a small group, with a partner, or one-one-one with an educator.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is: Academic and social

Educators have known for a long time that students learn from their peers. When students are encouraged to participate in tasks with a range of students, with a range of learning needs, they can understand new concepts far quicker than when they are explicitly taught these students with an adult.

Goals for students with diverse needs should be both academic and social. Educational environments need to strive to strengthen relationships between students by explicitly teaching social skills to all students.

Children with Down syndrome 'learn by doing' and 'learn by seeing' – what better way to do this than by having fun and building relationships with friends, *while* learning?

inclusion is: Meaningful learning

Many educators understand the concept of accommodating learning when it is too challenging. Of equal importance for our loved ones with Down syndrome is ensuring that learning is challenging enough.

High expectations and a belief in that every child can learn are just as important as making accessible changes to the curriculum.

> ***'...educators who are committed to equity believe in all children's capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities...Children progress well when they, their parents and educators hold high expectation for their learning'*** (DEEWR, 2009 & 2011).

Inclusion is: Belonging

Integration is very different to inclusion. Simply working in the same classroom as their peers is not the definition of inclusive for children with high-support needs. Inclusive means belonging to a community and being part of a group. When children feel like they belong, they are ready to learn.

Inclusion isn't being involved in whole school events like assemblies and sports events, but being withdrawn for all academic learning. Inclusive is being a complete part of every element of the school environment, whilst having goals specifically tailored for the growth and development of each child.

What is Inclusion?

Monash University Five Principles for Inclusive Education:



1. Diversity in the classroom enriches and strengthens education.
2. A strength-based and personal curriculum.
3. Student engagement, agency and voice.
4. Engaging with all your critical stakeholders.
5. Inclusive teachers need commitment, knowledge and practical skills.

What Schools Can't Say:



- *'We are not prepared to receive a child with disability.'*
- *'We can only accept your child if you help to pay for an education assistant.'*
- *'Your child will have a different curriculum because they won't keep up with their peers.'*
- *'Your child must sit at the back of the classroom, far away from everyone else so as not to disrupt the other students.'*
- *'Our 'quota' for disability has been met.'*
- *'We do not have the resources to support your child so you should consider another school.'*

Parents play a key role in inclusive education as partners and collaborators. Down Syndrome NSW is here to help, as trusted experts with a range of tools, resources, workshops and consultations through our Inclusive Education Initiative designed to support teacher, schools and parents to ensure the very best inclusive education for all students with Down syndrome.

References

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New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2021). School Excellence Framework Alignment.

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About Down Syndrome NSW

Once upon a time in NSW, Australia, there was a remarkable group of individuals who had children who were born with Down syndrome. Inspired by their children's journey and fueled by their desire to create a more inclusive society, the parents embarked on a mission to establish an organisation dedicated to supporting individuals with Down syndrome and their families. And so, the seeds of Down Syndrome NSW were sown.

As the word spread, more families joined these gatherings, forming a tight-knit community that offered support, understanding, and hope.

The parent group worked tirelessly to run programs and collaborated with healthcare professionals, educators, and community leaders to raise awareness about Down syndrome and advocate for improved services and opportunities.

With the growing momentum, Down Syndrome NSW vision expanded beyond support groups and advocacy. They envisioned a dedicated organisation that could provide a wide range of services to individuals with Down syndrome, from newborn babies right through to support for the aging. With the help of passionate volunteers and the backing of the community, Down Syndrome NSW began to take shape.

Today, Down Syndrome NSW continues to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of the community. We have become a catalyst for change, breaking down barriers and championing the rights and abilities of individuals with Down syndrome. These parents and their story stand as a testament to the power of compassion, determination, and the enduring spirit of individuals, who make a profound impact on the world by turning their dreams into reality.

About our Inclusive Education Initiative

Down Syndrome NSW's Education Program supports students with Down syndrome to be meaningfully included and supported at every stage of their schooling. The program works alongside educators, schools, and families to provide evidence-based guidance, practical strategies, and tailored resources that strengthen inclusive practice in real classrooms. Through this work, the program builds educator confidence, improves understanding of student needs, and contributes to lasting changes in classroom practice that benefit students with Down syndrome and the wider school community.

