

What an inclusive classroom entails

If you are reading this you are probably searching for information to ensure that your child or someone very special to you is receiving the best educational services possible to meet their individual needs, so thank you for being an advocate for effective inclusive practice.

What is inclusion, and what does inclusion look like in classrooms? Simply stated, inclusion is about **ALL students belonging!**

Decisions are made on the basis of student needs and not on labels and places.

- The general education classroom at the student's enrolled grade level is the reference point for student-specific planning.
- Expectations are high.
- Instruction is based on the curriculum standards adopted by the school or state. There is no separate curriculum.
- Individualized supports are available when needed.

We often think that effective inclusion is about names, the uniqueness of every child, and not numbers or scores. It's about student needs, and not the labels often attached to individual students. And, effective inclusion is about the services provided rather than the places where those services are offered.

Let's first consider the quality standards for an inclusive school and classroom by asking the following questions.

Instructional setting

- Are students educated at the same school they would attend if they did not have a disability?
- Is the general education classroom at their enrolled grade level the first consideration when the instructional setting is discussed?
- Are special education instructional settings, if located outside of the general education classroom, placed throughout the school building within age, grade, or department-appropriate areas?

- Are the facilities used by special populations students comparable to those used by general education students?
- Is the classroom arrangement organized so as to support access for all students?
- Is the classroom climate inviting and welcoming and supportive of all learners?
- Are decisions about instructional settings determined on the basis of student needs rather than labels or available services?

Collaboration

- Is there a vision of shared ownership where all students are considered “our students”?
- Are general education and special populations teachers members of grade level/department teams, and do they regularly plan together?
- Are all faculty members knowledgeable of each of their student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)?

Instruction

- Do teachers use a variety of research-based instructional strategies such as multi-level instruction, cooperative learning, activity-based instruction, etc. to reach all students?
- Is differentiated instruction the predominant instructional methodology used in classrooms rather than lecture-based instruction?
- Do teachers understand the difference between accommodations and modifications?
- Is there a campus-wide behavioural support system in place at the school?
- Do teachers have a variety of rich resources, materials, and technology to support all learners?

Continuum of support

- Are external supports provided in advance of instruction to promote student success?
- Are there in-class support options for students with special needs such as natural or formal peer support, intermittent support from teachers or teacher assistants, or formal collaborative teaching (two teachers sharing instruction)?
- Do service personnel such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech pathologists provide services within the general education classroom when appropriate?
- If a student leaves the classroom, is it for targeted support only that could not be provided in the classroom?

Seven observations

- **All** students are engaged in meaningful work that supports their instructional goals!
- Learner objectives, activities, and rules are positively stated and clearly posted.
- A variety of instructional strategies, materials, technology, and groupings are being used.
- Services are brought to the general education classroom where the staff works together to meet student needs.
- Students with special needs are not stigmatized by adult supports, and student-to-student interactions are evident.
- Assignments are purposeful, involve meaningful work, and maintain rigour.
- The classroom arrangement supports positive behaviour and learning. Students can access materials with adequate room for small groups and quick transitions.

The 3 R'S

Although standards and observation checklists are helpful guides to identify inclusive classrooms, sometimes it's easier to remember what I call the "**3 R's**" of effective inclusion are **respect, relationships and responsibility**.

Respect

Inclusive classrooms provide an environment of **respect** for each and every student. **All** students have names, gifts, and talents. Here's Tanya, a talented artist, in fourth grade; Israel in middle school and a great athlete; Savannah starting Pre-K, and she loves animals. All students belong and are members of the general education classroom. They are known by their names and unique personalities and strengths not by numbers or scores.

Relationships

When students are respected and accepted as full members of their school community, **relationships** develop. Students are no longer isolated but are connected members of a school community. Relationships create a safety net for students to develop a growth mindset, a belief that they can learn if they work hard and persevere. Student needs, not labels, drive instructional and support decisions.

Responsibility

Once relationships form, teachers, students, and parents develop the capacity to address all kinds of student diversity better and share the **responsibility** for student success. The general education classroom becomes the starting point for all students, and services and supports are brought to that classroom as needed and appropriate. Teachers do not blame students but claim responsibility for their success.

These three R's, respect, relationships, and responsibility, help us to remember what inclusion is all about in and out of classrooms and throughout the larger community.

Source: 2020

