

Inclusion: Myths and Misconceptions



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What keeps children with intellectual disabilities out of regular schools? Skeptics and critics give many reasons why inclusive education doesn't work. Some of the reasons they give are inconsequential while others do indeed identify issues that are obstacles to successful inclusion. Many are myths, others are misconceptions. All too often they continue to be cited when there is overwhelming evidence to contradict them.

This pamphlet sets out a response to ten of the most frequently heard myths and misconceptions about inclusive education.



1. Inclusion is an unrealistic idea.

Not at all. There are hundreds of schools that have been inclusive in many countries for several decades. Examples can be found in every continent, some reflective of system wide practice, and others in individual communities or schools. Some of the areas identified as global leaders are Italy, New Brunswick in Canada, Portugal, Styria in Austria, New Zealand and more. The point? If hundreds of schools can put in place practices that make inclusion a reality, what is the obstacle for other schools? Just a cursory search on the web will reveal more than enough evidence to show that inclusion is **REALISTIC**. Critics need to tell us how many examples of inclusive schools they need before they acknowledge that inclusion is indeed realistic!

2. Inclusion education is a simplistic one-size-fits-all approach that will not work.

Inclusion is not based on the idea that one-size-fits-all. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Inclusive classrooms build in approaches to curriculum and teaching that adjust to the real needs and learning styles of students. Learning outcomes are adjusted to accommodate differences among students. Teachers in an inclusive classroom do not assume all students will learn the same things at the same rate. The teacher uses concepts and strategies from the 'universal design for learning' (UDL) model as well as practices described as 'multi-level instruction' or 'differentiated instruction'. Supporting teachers to provide a range of learning opportunities for a diverse student population is precisely what inclusive education is all about.

3. Inclusion is OK for some, but it isn't for everyone, especially those with intellectual disabilities.

There are several assumptions underlying this myth. First it continues a long-standing dismissive attitude toward children with intellectual disabilities and their potential. It questions their capacity to learn and contributes to marginalizing their opportunities to be part of our schools and communities. Instead of using intellectual disability as a rationale to exclude certain children, we need to ask, "What does a teacher need to do to help them learn valuable knowledge and skills in the regular classroom?" Respecting a child's right to be part of a peer group in a community school is fundamental to 21st century respect for human rights and equality as supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

4. Inclusion makes unrealistic demands on teachers.

Making classrooms and schools inclusive is not easy. It takes hard work by well-trained, well-supported and committed teachers. Teacher education programs must prepare young teachers for the diverse students who are found in classrooms today. Teachers need new skills and knowledge to be effective with students with a wide range of learning styles and needs. They must know how to make use of new instructional technologies and ways of doing things. And most of all, teachers need to work in schools that are collaborative and that ensure each teacher gets effective and timely support when it is needed. Supports need to be made available the classroom in a way that benefits both the teacher and students. Good teachers with support from school principals, other teachers, support staff and parents can meet the challenge.

5. Inclusion harms 'typical' students because students with disabilities take up too much of the teacher's time.

Critics often say that students with disabilities require far too much of the teacher's time and as a result reduce the learning opportunities for others. This argument often suggests that since a student with an intellectual disability has an 'individual program' it follows that this means the teacher has to spend one-on-one time with the child. If several students in the class need this assistance, the teacher will have to neglect others.

The problem with this argument is that it does not reflect how teachers conduct themselves in the classroom. A 50-minute class session with 25 students does not

mean the teacher spends 2 minutes with each child. Teachers develop and use instructional strategies that engage students as a whole group, in a small group, in several small groups, or in some cases, as individuals. They organize instruction using flexible approaches and with effective planning they can successfully accommodate the needs of their students.



However, we need to acknowledge that even the most capable teachers will encounter situations where they need help. In those circumstances, a support teacher can help develop a plan, and in some cases an educational assistant may be required to carry the plan out. Many teachers do this now, every day, in schools around the world.

Preparing teachers to include students with intellectual disabilities in their classes can help to improve the quality of education for all students. Using teaching techniques such as peer tutoring, differentiated instruction, and recognizing multiple intelligence serves all students well.

Finally, students without a disability in inclusive classrooms have the opportunity to learn about diversity and how to communicate with and support their classmates who have different learning styles and needs. Inclusive classrooms can help students learn important lessons about compassion and how we create more inclusive societies.

6. Regular schools and teachers are not trained to deal with students with disabilities and they need instruction provided by special teachers trained to work with them.

Many teachers believe this to be true and a teacher may not know some of the specific things about an individual child which they need to know to teach effectively. But that is true for 'specialist teachers' as well. Every child is unique and every child needs teachers, parents, and on some occasions, 'experts' to consider a plan that will lead to the student's success in learning. That includes students with disabilities, but it also is true for other students.

Well trained, effective teachers know 90% of what they need to know to teach any

child, including those with an intellectual disability. Collaboration with a support teacher or other professional can fill the gaps and lead to success. The experience a teacher has one year with a student helps build capacity for the future, thus strengthening the school for students who come along later.

With few exceptions, teachers are generalists when it comes to instructional strategies. Even 'special education teachers' are trained to use 'core' teaching approaches. Whether it is a 'classroom teacher', or a 'specialist teacher', each child will need a personalized set of practices to be a successful learner.



What about 'life skills'? Children with intellectual disabilities do need to acquire life skills: social skills, including communication and behaviour as well as academic skills appropriate for the individual. However, it is important to recognize that when a student is withdrawn from an inclusive classroom and engagement with peers is reduced, there will be negative consequences. Perhaps the most important is that 'membership' in the peer group where engagement and participation lead to belonging, will be damaged. Striking a balance between belonging and special instruction appropriate for each individual is essential. Children with intellectual disabilities need the social benefit of being included more than most of their peers.

7. Students with disabilities will be bullied and poorly treated in inclusive schools.

One of the goals of inclusion is to create and sustain a culture that makes each student a valued member of the school community. Ensuring that each student has a sense of belonging is the task of each student and staff member. School leaders and teachers provide a model and students will follow. When bullying does occur, it can be dealt with appropriately and be used as an occasion for learning. While there may be a risk of abusive treatment in an inclusive school, that risk is also present in segregated settings. What's more, most schools find that once inclusion moves forward and becomes routine, more positive behaviour results. In many cases, it is other children who most effectively promote a positive and respectful school environment.

8. Students need to be *ready* to learn what the teacher will teach, or they shouldn't be in the class.

The concept of 'readiness' has been around for a long time. It is at least partially responsible for the thinking that children need to successfully complete the curriculum established for one grade before they move on to another. For example, a student has to be successful with grade 8 math before being part of a grade 9 math class. This seems to be reasonable but there is a serious flaw in the logic. First, it assumes that the only consideration for class placement is based on curriculum; in fact, other factors are also involved. One of the most important is chronological age and the value of establishing and maintaining a peer group. Many countries make students eligible for 12 or 13 years of public education. If a student's math or reading achievement is at a grade 3 level, will the child have to stay in grade 3 indefinitely? Clearly this once frequently used practice does not work in the 21st century. Children need to move along with their peer group and the curriculum must be adapted for the student. It cannot be rigid and restrictive. The grade 9 math class requires the teacher to adjust the learning requirement for the students in the class. The vision for teachers is to make the curriculum 'ready' for the student; it is not to restrict instruction to only those students who themselves are 'ready'. Instead of asking if the child is ready for the class, we need to ask if the school and teacher are ready for the student.

9. Teaching students with intellectual disabilities in the community school costs too much money.

Supporting teachers and students does cost money. Inclusion is not a way for schools to save money. However, there are three key considerations when it comes to funding and inclusion. First, it is important to remember that the money being spent on special education can be re-directed to support inclusion. The money spent on special education teachers, educational assistants and buildings and services can be used to help build capacity in regular schools and classrooms. Additional investments may well be needed, especially in situations where students with disabilities are currently underserved. We know that in many countries they are the children most likely to be left out, in many cases, receiving no education at all.

Second, we need to recognize that every investment we make in supporting teachers to learn new strategies and use new approaches will enhance their capacity to be successful with other students in the future. In other words, we are strengthening the capacity of the school to accommodate the needs of a diverse student population. Over time, this approach can benefit the teacher and the students. It is an investment worth making.

Finally, while it is true that making inclusion work well requires financial support, it is a myth that schools can only be inclusive if they are well resourced beyond what is practical in a particular community, state or country. The most fundamental value of inclusion is that children are in school with their peer group in a community school. Most schools would welcome additional resources for smaller classes, more support personnel and more professional learning time for teachers. However, including a child in the schools in the community should not be deterred by the demand for more resources.



10. Many parents don't want inclusion for their child with an intellectual disability.

It is true that many parents are skeptical about having their child with an intellectual disability attending a regular class in a regular school. For far too long, they have had good reason to be skeptical. The idea that learning outcomes and curriculum need to be established for children with each type of disability (Example: Intellectually Disabled; Visually Impaired; Autism Spectrum; Emotionally Disturbed among others) promotes and sustains parents in this view. It is also true that many regular schools have not been welcoming to children with disabilities. Often, teachers have been anxious about having to accommodate these children.

However, it is also true that parents can gain confidence in inclusion when they are met by positive acceptance and the commitment from teachers and school leaders to do their best. When parents and teachers work as partners they can change attitudes and build a school culture where it is clear that every child, including those with intellectual disabilities belong. That is our vision and that is our challenge.

Final Thoughts

Providing positive responses to these myths and misconceptions will help us in the work of making our schools inclusive. Parents and teachers need to work together to ensure that students with intellectual disabilities will have the opportunity to learn and grow together during their school years. Transitioning from segregation and sustaining inclusive schooling in our communities must be a priority. By working together, we can create a society that ensures quality, equity and equal rights for each child.



Catalyst for Inclusive Education is a global initiative of Inclusion International.

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