



Down Syndrome
Australia

Inclusive education

This fact sheet has been developed to help teachers, families, people with Down syndrome and interested members of the community understand best practice inclusion in education and the benefits to all students of this approach.

What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education is where students of all abilities are taught together and all students are seen as having something diverse and valuable to add to the educational environment. The contributions of all students are valued and appropriate adjustments are made to the curriculum to support involvement of students who have diverse abilities. A segregated learning unit or classroom within a mainstream school is not inclusion.

“Inclusive education involves embracing human diversity and welcoming all students and adults as equal members of an educational community. This involves valuing and supporting the full participation of all people together within accessible educational settings. Inclusive education is an approach to education free from discriminatory beliefs, attitudes

and practices, including free from ableism. Inclusive education requires putting inclusive values into action to ensure all children and adults belong, participate and flourish.”¹

What inclusive education is and is not:

- It is about being with everyone else. It is about everyone being together.
- It is about everyone being able to work on their own goals in a way which blends into the common class lesson and accesses the same curriculum. It is about everyone being able to work on their own goals based on the theme or focus of the lesson.
- It is about working in naturally supportive, flexible structures and groupings with other students.
- It is about having many opportunities to be immersed in a socially rich and communication rich environment.
- It is about everyone being part of a community and being known and valued.

¹ Inclusion in Education - Towards Equality for Students with Disability, Issues paper by Dr Kathy Cologon commissioned by Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2013.

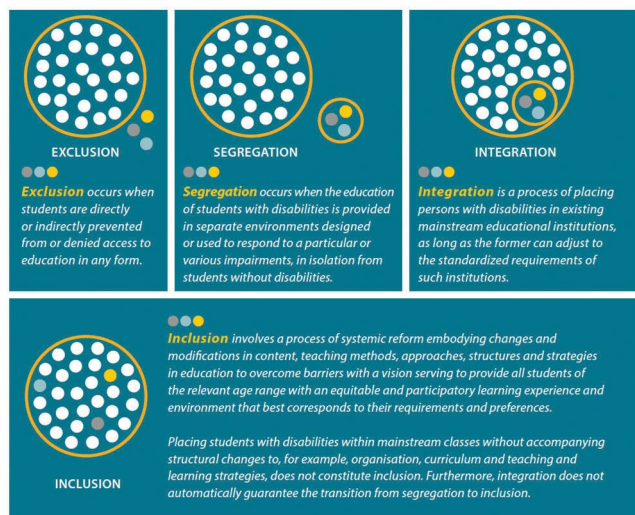
- Inclusive education is not about students with disabilities 'keeping up' with the academic level of the class. Students should have opportunities to be successful and to have their achievements recognised and celebrated.
- It is not about students needing to be independent as a condition of entry or to have skills to 'survive'.
- It is not about trying to make a disability invisible or pretending the students with disabilities are able to do exactly the same things as everyone else.

Segregated education settings

Families make decisions about educational settings based on a number of different factors. Some families decide, for a range of reasons and depending on the options available to them, to enrol their child in a segregated educational setting. This can be a special school setting or in a segregated learning unit within a mainstream school. A special school delivers education in a segregated setting only for students with a disability. A segregated learning unit is part of a mainstream school but is a separate learning space with a different curriculum to the rest of the school. Only students with additional learning needs are part of the learning support unit.

What is inclusion?

Educational environments for students with disabilities range from a complete denial of formal educational services to equal participation in all aspects of the education system. For this paper, we describe the educational experiences of students with disabilities using the following four categories:



Source: United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities General Comment No. 4

Inclusive education is a human rights issue

Children with a disability have the right to access inclusive education according to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRC). Australia has specific obligations under various international treaties and conventions to ensure that children and adults with disability are able to realise their human right to education on the same basis as children and adults without a disability.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)* recognised the rights of children and adults with a disability to attending mainstream educational settings. Under the DDA a school is not permitted to discriminate on the grounds of disability:

- by refusing or failing to accept the person's application for admission as a student
- in the terms or conditions on which it is prepared to admit the person as a student
- by denying the student access, or limiting the student's access, to any benefit provided by the educational authority;
- by expelling the student
- by subjecting the student to any other detriment
- by developing curricula or training courses having a content that will either exclude the person from participation, or subject the person to any other detriment; or
- by accrediting curricula or training courses having such a content.

The Human Rights Commission is responsible for managing and investigating any complaints about discrimination relating to the DDA. More information about the Human Rights Commission can be accessed at: www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights

Access for all

Access to universally accessible education is an important issue because it contributes to fostering inclusion in the community, rather than segregation. It promotes the right of all people to access quality education in a community that sees strength in diversity. It promotes better understanding of disability and the strengths and contributions that all people can make in society, with or without a disability.

Social and academic benefits of inclusive education

“No review could be found comparing segregation and inclusion that came out in favour of segregation in over forty years of research.”

Robert Jackson, Adjunct Associate Professor of Education, Edith Cowan University. Inclusion or Segregation for Children with an Intellectual Impairment: What does the Research Say?, 2008.

With over 40 years of research and study, the evidence to support better outcomes for both students with and without a disability in inclusive education is overwhelming. The research shows that students learn more and achieve more in an inclusive education setting. The research highlights that students with a disability:

- have greater academic gains
- have improved social skills
- make greater progress in literacy
- have more friendships
- demonstrate improved communication skills.

For children without a disability, the evidence suggests that there is no detrimental effect of inclusion and possibly a positive impact on their academic performance². There is also some evidence that inclusion has a positive impact on students without a disability including they:

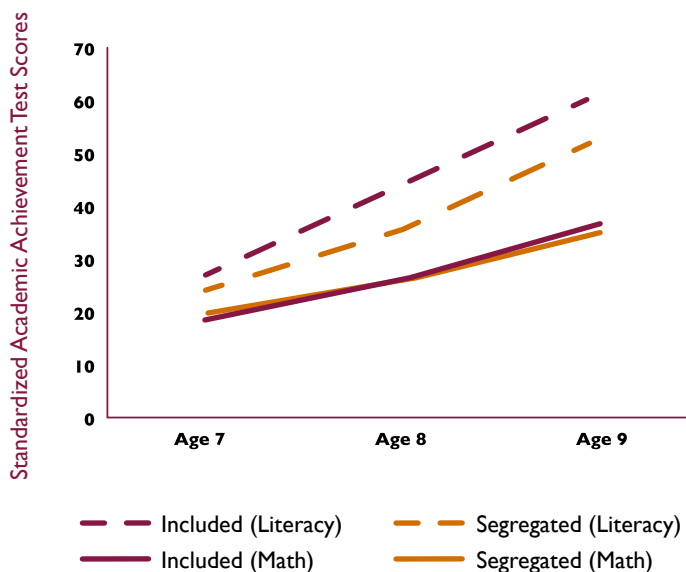
- are more accepting of diversity
- have a positive attitude towards disability
- have better social skills
- have more developed values and ethics.

² [“Academic achievement of students without special educational needs in inclusive classrooms: A meta-analysis”](#), Grzegorz Szumski, Joanna Smogorzewska, Maciej Karwowski in *Educational Research Review* 21 (2017) 33e54

The evidence also highlights that adults with a disability who were in a mainstream school setting are more likely to be employed and live independently post education.

The research shows specifically for children with Down syndrome, that the amount of time spent with typically developing peers is associated with a range of academic and social benefits, such as improved memory and stronger language and literacy skills.

Students with Down syndrome who are included develop stronger literacy skills than segregated students



Source: (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012)

Challenges to inclusive education and strategies to overcome them

Some of the barriers to inclusive education are systemic due to there being both mainstream and special schools providing education in Australia. Every state and territory also has different educational systems so there is no nationally consistent approach to inclusive education.

Families of children with Down syndrome often report that they experience barriers when approaching mainstream educational settings. Often this is a school saying they can't provide the support the child needs or don't have adequate funding for children with additional needs.

In some cases, this might be a deterrent for the family, however, often this school may be the best option as there are other siblings at the school or because of its proximity to home, for example.

How to overcome these challenges

If families do meet this type of response from a school it can be helpful to:

- Provide the school with examples of the kinds of support and inclusion that are happening at other schools.
- Provide the school with evidence to support inclusion. This could include, [All students Learning Together booklet](#) or All Means All's "[Inclusive Education: What Does the Research Say?](#)"
- Advise the school that they don't have to be experts in inclusion from the start but it's important that they have a willingness to learn and create a positive inclusive culture – having the 'will' is the start and getting the "skill" is the next step.
- Talk to the school about the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Talk to your state based Down syndrome association.
- Arrange a meeting with the Department of Education in your state or territory.

Families may not always get the outcome from the school that is acceptable to them, however, starting this conversation with the school, may prompt the school to look at supporting inclusion at a future point in time. Families can make a formal complaint through the Department of Education in the relevant state or territory or escalate a complaint to the Human Rights Commission if appropriate.

Some families also make the decision for their child to attend a special school because they believe this will be the best option for their child. A lack of support for inclusive education from families can also be a barrier to understanding the benefits of inclusive education on a broader scale.

For more information and links to the research, please visit:

Down syndrome association contact details

There is a Down syndrome association in each state and territory. You can contact these associations for support and advice. We are here to help you. Our associations are made up of a wide range of parents, professionals and people with Down syndrome who work or volunteer with us. Please visit our website at www.downsyndrome.org.au or call 1300 881 935 to be automatically connected to your closest association.

Training for teachers – Down Syndrome Education International

www.dseinternational.org/en-us

More information available at

All Means All - www.allmeansall.org.au

Family Advocacy - www.family-advocacy.com

Human Rights Commission - www.humanrights.gov.au

Links to Research

Alana - alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability - www.include.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Inclusion_Seg.pdf

Academic achievement of students without special educational needs in inclusive classrooms: A meta analysis - www.researchgate.net/publication/314288511_Academic_achievement_of_students_without_special_educational_needs_in_inclusive_classrooms_A_meta-analysis

Family Advocacy - www.family-advocacy.com/ordinary-lives/school-years