



Inclusive Schools are Effective Schools

Developing inclusive environments for students with additional learning needs

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Inclusive Schools are Effective Schools

Introduction

The Victorian Government believes that all government school students, including those with disabilities and additional learning needs, are entitled to an excellent education that provides them with a genuine opportunity to succeed. In responding to this vision, mainstream and special schools in Victoria are adopting policies and practices that are driven by the desire to be providers of high quality education services to all students regardless of their learning needs.

This paper explores some of the beliefs, policies and practices that are contributing to schools becoming more inclusive and more responsive to the diversity of students' academic, social and personal learning needs. These beliefs, policies and practices are having positive effects on the engagement and learning of all students and are providing the evidence that highly inclusive schools are highly effective schools.

Inclusive schools

Inclusive schools recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.

Whilst inclusive beliefs, policies and practices specifically address the needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs, they are equally beneficial for the full range of students. Schools that are inclusive adopt the belief that wherever possible all children should learn together regardless of differences; that all children can learn and achieve their potential; and that the continuum of students' needs should be matched by a continuum of programs, support and services. All students regardless of their ability or disability benefit from schools adopting inclusive practices. Box 1 describes the features of an inclusive learning environment.

Box1: Definitions of Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness is evident when:

- a school's enrolment practices do not discriminate between students with disabilities and those without disabilities;
- school services and facilities are equally accessible to students with disabilities and those without disabilities;
- curriculum programs are designed in such a way that the learning needs of all students are catered for;
- assessment and certification procedures are responsive to the learning outcomes targets and goals of students with and without disabilities;
- specialist services and equipment that students need to be able to experience

success with their learning are supplied; and

- the school environment is friendly and teachers and students respond positively to student diversity.

An inclusive education is characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between children with and those without additional learning needs, so that the focus is on:

- the level of capacity each individual child possesses to learn and progress;
- the learning and wellbeing outcomes sought; and
- the environment and support which the school undertakes to provide.

Effective schools

Effective schools are schools that produce learning outcomes for all students that are above typical expectations. Such schools do not settle for average performance, but take action to ensure that their teaching and learning environments and programs are highly responsive to the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities and additional learning needs. Staff in effective schools view students with disabilities as having sets of capabilities that need to be further developed and determine educational provision accordingly. Effective schools are also inclusive schools.

Broadly speaking, effective schools have developed whole-school processes that promote inclusive education and quality teaching and classroom practices that are responsive to the individual needs and diverse learning styles of students. Box 2 summarises some of the key characteristics of effective and inclusive schools. – characteristics that contribute to these schools providing all students, including those with disabilities and additional learning needs, with a quality education.

Box 2: Characteristics of an inclusive and effective school

An inclusive and effective school:

- is driven by a moral imperative to improve the learning outcomes of all students regardless of their capacities and backgrounds;
- adopts a whole school focus that is reflected in the school’s vision, beliefs, policies and practices;
- is deeply committed to the belief that all children can learn;
- recognises that all students have special learning needs of one sort or another;
- focuses on students’ learning needs rather than on their learning disabilities;
- provides learning programs and tasks that are targeted to students’ learning styles, interests and needs;
- has high expectations of students, sets unambiguous but challenging achievement targets, rewards effort and celebrates success;
- is alert to and uses a range of multi-skilled personnel (e.g. teachers, specialists, aides, clinicians, volunteers and other students) to assist students with their

learning;

- has a strong performance and development culture that supports all staff and volunteers to continuously improve their effectiveness to promote student learning;
- adopts a team teaching approach to meeting the diverse needs of learners;
- adopts an open classroom structure that enables various grouping sies to be assembled for teaching and learning;
- helps students to identify learning targets, regularly monitors performance and provides constructive feedback to students and parents on learning progress and challenges and how these can be achieved;
- provides additional support as soon as the need for this becomes evident; and
- forges strong links with parents, clinicians, caregivers, staff in local special schools, disability services providers and relevant support agencies within the wider community.

Each of the above characteristics or practices can be located in our schools, but not all of the characteristics are evident, or are not implemented as effectively as they need to be, in all our schools. Schools that are exemplary models of inclusiveness and effectiveness are working on a variety of fronts to sustain their inclusiveness and effectiveness. They also monitor their whole school processes and classroom practices to ensure that their policies and actions reflect current understandings about effective practice. They understand that to sustain effectiveness and inclusiveness adjustments may need to be made to school buildings, curriculum content, assessment procedures and methodologies, the format and suitability of teaching materials, learning activities, modes of delivery and teaching styles. They also understand that as our knowledge improves about how learning occurs, today's good practices will in due course provide the platform for and be replaced by a new generation of more effective practices.

Effective and inclusive schools

The discussion below elaborates the characteristics or beliefs, policies and practices described in Box 2 that combine to provide all students including those with disabilities and additional learning needs with a schooling experience that is meaningful and rewarding. The following sub-headings are used to signpost areas for reflection and action:

- School values, beliefs and expectations
- Teaching practices
- Learning communities
- Teaching and learning arrangements
- Learning environments
- School leadership

1. School values, beliefs and expectations

An effective and inclusive school is a school with a strong moral purpose. It believes that its purpose is to assist all students to learn and to keep them engaged with learning regardless of their ability or disability. Whilst the belief that all students can learn regardless of ability or disability, is now generally accepted throughout the teaching profession, the conditions for this belief to be realised are not always present in our schools and classrooms. An effective and inclusive school not only believes it can make a difference to a students' learning, it has high and unambiguous expectations for student learning, demands student effort and organises its resources to optimise students' opportunities for learning.

The two factors of effort and high expectations are intertwined. Whilst student achievement is a combination of student ability and effort, it is arguably the effort factor that has the greatest bearing on achievement and it is almost entirely the effort factor that produces student improvement. Simply put, doing one's best regardless of ability requires hard work and effort. The setting of high expectations provides the challenge and galvanises the effort. High expectations are never met without the appropriate level of effort. Securing student effort is the responsibility of the teachers and in effective schools teachers are highly adept at identifying student interests and designing learning tasks that motivate students to try hard and be achievement oriented.

2. Teaching and learning arrangements

Effective and inclusive schools make purposeful and strategic decisions about the allocation of teaching and learning resources. Schools have a broad range of teaching and learning resources at their disposal and the way that these resources are allocated can greatly impact on students' opportunities to learn. A school that is alert to the diverse needs of students would seek to optimise the personnel and resources within a classroom that are available to support student learning.

Schools that are attempting to address learning needs in new ways are changing the conventional mix of staff in schools. Along with classroom teachers they have employed youth workers, counsellors, special education teachers and clinicians. The engagement of staff with special education expertise can complement and extend the skills of teachers and other paraprofessional staff who are traditionally employed within a school setting to support students with additional needs.

Effective and inclusive schools understand that students' developmental needs are best promoted through a collaborative approach and by focusing on the students' learning needs rather than on their disability. They understand that a range of multi-skilled personnel (e.g. teachers, specialists, teacher aides, clinicians, volunteers and other students) are available to support students with

their learning and that decisions about the allocation of special program funds should be based on the desire to make the classroom a rich learning environment for all where additional support is available for those with special needs.

3. Teaching practices

Teachers in effective and inclusive schools know their students and understand their learning needs. They are able to adapt current pedagogical knowledge and thinking and apply it in different ways, so that each student is engaged in meaningful learning experiences. They reflect on their adaptations and continually seek to improve their ability to design and deliver curriculum and learning activities that are relevant to each child's real life experiences and needs. They ensure that all students have opportunities and choices that enable them to participate in the full range of programs and services available within the school and the local community.

Teachers in effective and inclusive schools are able to engage all students in productive learning, value the contributions of all students and work to create environments where all students can participate in and contribute meaningfully to the learning activities.

Effective and inclusive schools have processes for engaging parents, carers and students in discussions about students' learning needs, goals and targets and for converting these discussions into manageable and challenging teaching and learning plans for each student that guide student learning efforts. Short-term and longer-term learning goals and targets within the learning plans are success orientated and aspirational. Classroom activities and strategies and home activities that will be used to help the student achieve a particular short-term goal and the way the progress towards or achievement of the goal will be measured are also recorded in students' learning plans.

The assessment and reporting practices adopted by teachers provide them with insights into the way that the student's learning is progressing and what needs to be done next. Reports provide parents with insights into the achievements of their child, the challenges that lie ahead and what they and the teacher can do to assist the student to meet these challenges.

4. Learning environments

A precondition for student learning is the establishment of an environment where students feel welcome, valued and cared for. A key element of effectiveness and inclusiveness is the capacity to create supportive learning environments. Supportive and productive learning environments are evident when students are willing to step outside their comfort zone to explore and express new ideas, to

work within various student groupings, to assume leadership or support roles and to assume greater personal responsibility for managing their learning.

In effective and inclusive schools, teachers spend time finding out about the interests and background of each student and are able to respond positively and non-judgementally to student contributions. Effective and inclusive teachers do not leave the learning environment to chance but actively foster the building of positive relationships between students, the development of cooperation and teamwork, and institute classroom procedures that reflect a commitment to fairness, consideration and a respect for others. They also build the expectation that students will contribute and provide support, when it is needed, to students with differing abilities and life experiences.

Effective and inclusive schools do not consider the physical spaces available to learning as being immutable. Teachers and administrators in effective and inclusive schools understand the importance that the built environment can play in promoting or hindering student learning opportunities. Effective and inclusive schools review the impact that the physical environment has on teaching practices and student learning and understand that there may be a need to modify the physical learning spaces to better accommodate the different combinations of staff and students that are required to meet students' learning needs.

Effective and inclusive schools establish learning environments that facilitate team teaching, the use of teacher aides, specialists or trained volunteers and to increase the flexibility to vary the size and composition of classroom learning groups. This can entail the joining of two or three learning spaces into a single or partitioned larger space, the subdivision of a larger space into more intimate learning spaces or the connection of the classroom to outdoor learning spaces. In these modifications a space may be created for supervised structured play, silent reading or small group instruction or turned into a dedicated oral language centre that contains games, toys and other artefacts that are used to stimulate students' imagination and oral language development.

5. Learning communities

Effective and inclusive schools have a culture of high professional trust and collegiality and a culture that fosters openness, inquiry, risk taking and innovation. Staff teams in effective and inclusive schools meet regularly to provide each other with information and support and to review the progress of all students involved in the team's program. They work collaboratively to enhance the effectiveness of curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment and reporting procedures. Through collaboration, professional exchange, visiting each others' classroom and providing each other with feedback, coaching,

mentoring and networking teachers improve their personal professional knowledge and skills and the effectiveness of the total teaching team.

Effective and inclusive schools provide training programs for teacher aides, clinicians, parents, staff and students so that a multi-skilled team is available, as required, to support the classroom teacher with program development, monitoring student work and managing small group or intensive one-on-one support.

Effective and inclusive schools are alert to the need to explore the role that specialists might play in supporting them to become more inclusive of students with additional needs. As an alternative or adjunct to employing specialist teachers, effective and inclusive schools establish good links with local special schools and call on specialist teachers and clinicians to provide professional learning (workshops, mentoring, lesson planning advice, observation and feedback, demonstration lessons, etc.) on specialist teaching strategies.

6. Leadership

It is the combination of certain beliefs, policies and practices that help to characterise inclusive and effective schools and differentiate them from other schools. Effective and inclusive schools not only support the principle of inclusive education, if they make changes in their structures, processes and practices as required to translate this principle into action. However, initiating actions to adopt and improve upon the characteristics described in this paper needs to be approached strategically.

Whilst dramatic change may not be required by those schools whose practices already reflect a strong commitment to inclusiveness, schools that are yet to fully embrace the beliefs and practices briefly outlined in this paper may need to undertake a substantial cultural shift. Beliefs and expectations may need to be challenged, teaching and learning policies and practices may need to be revised, learning spaces and employment practices may need to be modified and roles and responsibilities of staff may need to be redefined. The role of leadership in managing such changes is paramount.

School leaders in effective and inclusive schools are adept at managing change and at building a school culture that is committed to inclusiveness and that is improvement oriented. They promote positive relationships between staff and with parents and the broader community and provide curriculum leadership. They can work with staff and the broader community to articulate a vision for the school and establish processes and structures that support staff to translate the vision into effective policies and practices.

Leaders in effective schools are openly committed to maximising the educational opportunities of all students regardless of abilities and backgrounds. Their commitment to sustaining inclusive environments is measured by their investment in long-term strategies, infrastructure and curriculum and teaching innovations that advance the learning opportunities of students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

Reflection questions for schools

To what extent do we:

- share the belief that all students can learn?
- judge our performance in terms of our effectiveness in catering for the full range of abilities within the school?
- use teaching and learning strategies and practices that cater for the diverse needs of our students?
- tap into the expertise of para-professionals, clinicians and teachers with specialist knowledge of the learning needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs?
- establish learning environments that enable the needs of all students including those with disabilities and additional learning needs be met?
- establish learning spaces that facilitate teaching to large and small groups and the use of para-professionals and volunteers to support the learning needs of small groups or individuals within the class?
- participate in professional learning activities focused on improving teaching strategies and learning programs for students with diverse learning needs?
- work collaboratively to plan, deliver and review learning programs and activities?
- observe each others' practice and provide feedback on teaching and classroom effectiveness?
- establish effective partnerships with parents and engage them in discussing and reviewing their child's learning achievements and challenges?
- have an agreed plan to guide our efforts to become more inclusive and effective?

Conclusion

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* (Department of Education and Training 2003) makes a commitment to:

- ensure that all young people in Victoria have access to a quality education;
- improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students;
- more effectively target and measure student performance cross the whole system; and
- enhance teacher capacity to deliver quality education programs to all students.

In order to meet this commitment, school communities need to recognise and celebrate student diversity and create innovative, flexible and inclusive environments where all students, including students with disabilities and additional learning needs, feel safe and motivated to learn. Effective schools consistently cater for the diversity of their students' learning needs and it is this capacity that makes them both effective and inclusive.

The brief descriptions of the characteristics of effective and inclusive schools and the questions for reflection are provided to stimulate discussion about the beliefs, policies and practices that schools need to embrace in order to become highly effective in responding to the diversity of their students' academic, social and personal learning needs. The paper also seeks to promote action directed at making our schools more inclusive and effective.

Professional Reading

- High Expectations of all learners, Blueprint for Government Schools, 2003
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/blueprint/es/expectations.htm>
- Student Wellbeing Branch, Office of School Education, Department of Education and Training
 - Intervening in the Early Years of Schooling for Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs, Discussion Paper #1
 - Quality Provision of Education for Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs, Discussion Paper #3