



FAQs on Schooling for Disabled Children and Young People

With answers from CSIE and IEAG





Which children do you call disabled?

The **Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (UK)** defines a disabled person as one who has “a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” and provides clarifications and exclusions to this definition. Informed by the voice of disabled people, CSIE views disability as an experience arising from the interaction between a) people’s impairments and b) inflexible structures around them. For example, a wheelchair user in front of a ramp would not be disabled from reaching the door; in front of a flight of steps s/he would. **The term “special educational needs”, by focusing on characteristics of the person and not their environment, seems inadequate.**

Special schools have been specifically set up to cater for the needs of disabled children. Why deprive these children of such tailor-made provision?

Many of today’s special schools have evolved out of Health-managed Junior Training Centres, which were themselves set up at a time when disabled people were mostly seen as defective and/or objects of pity. Today many of these institutions remain, but the mentality that created them is increasingly called into question: as social values progress and people with unusual bodies or minds are increasingly appreciated and respected as people, it makes little social, educational or moral sense to maintain separate educational institutions for a small minority of children. At a time when personalised learning is a strong feature of mainstream schooling, there is no reason why tailor-made provision has to take place in separate institutions. CSIE suggests that with creative use of resources, including human resources, this question can be turned on its head: **why deprive disabled children of the opportunity to grow up, learn and develop with their peers?**

Well-resourced inclusion is very expensive. Doesn’t it make financial sense to have all relevant resources in one location and educate disabled children there?

Even if this did make financial sense, it would be a very poor argument for maintaining structures that lead people into living their lives in the margins. Disabled adults tell us that segregated education is inappropriate for disabled pupils because it perpetuates stereotypes, disempowers disabled people and keeps them at the margins of society. **Isn’t it about time we started to listen?**

That said, segregated schooling is very expensive too. Millions of pounds are spent each year to transport many children long distances twice a day, often by taxi with an escort. This makes neither financial nor educational sense.

Mainstream school staff do not have the specialist equipment or training needed to cater for the needs of disabled children. How are we supposed to educate them?

It might be worth clarifying what it means to ‘educate’ children and young people. Some see the principal aim of education as generating the workforce of tomorrow while others see it as preparing all young people for adult life. CSIE considers this a false dichotomy and suggests the two are not mutually exclusive; indeed, the former is part of the latter. It seems self-evident that preparing young people for adult life is one of the fundamental aims of education. If we want to prepare today’s pupils for tomorrow’s inclusive society, it seems pointless to work with some children in one type of setting and with others in separate institutions. All children and young people benefit from growing up, learning and developing with each other.

As for resources and training, of course they help. Accessing resources and training often requires funds, time and will. (And we all know what happens “when there is a will”.) Principles underpinning “special education”, however, are not all that different from principles underpinning “education”. Many mainstream school staff have been pleasantly surprised to find that creative ways to respond to the diversity of learners often emerge from their own resourceful thinking, sometimes in consultation with external agencies, always in consultation with young people and their families. This is not to say that inclusion is easy. But it is possible.

In the words of Micheline Mason, founder and former director of the **Alliance for Inclusive Education (www.allfie.org.uk)** “Appropriate resources are vital for the learning and development of disabled children. The most essential resource is free and abundant in mainstream schools: non-disabled children.”



Disabled children would be teased and bullied in mainstream schools. Why subject them to harsh treatment?

Recent research by Norwich and Kelly (2004) has shown that young pupils with statements of special educational needs for moderate learning difficulties were bullied as much in mainstream schools as they were in special schools. The researchers also found that pupils attending special schools experienced far more 'bullying' by children of mainstream schools and by peers and outsiders in their neighbourhood.

The abstract of Norwich and Kelly's article, **Pupils' views on inclusion: moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools** is available free (*there may be a charge for the full-text*).

Many schools that have included disabled pupils have found that children are far more accommodating than anticipated; it is usually adults who make stereotypical assumptions. In any case, a school which fosters inclusive values would be far less likely to see any mistreatment of any student.

A disabled learner would take up too much of the teacher's time. Why should other children's learning suffer?

The vision of an inclusive education for all learners does not equate to admitting all children and young people in mainstream schools as we know them. Much more than this, it is about restructuring mainstream provision so that every school can value, respect and support the learning and development of all children and young people.

National guidance suggests that the education of disabled learners falls within the remit of all teachers. Removing Barriers to Achievement, the UK Government's Strategy for SEN (2004) states:

"All teachers should expect to teach children with special educational needs (SEN) and all schools should play their part in educating children from their local community, whatever their background or ability."

At the same time, UK legislation for over 25 years has stipulated that disabled children should be educated in their local mainstream school, as long as this does not affect the efficient education of other children. This begs the question: what steps have been taken to restructure mainstream provision, so that the presence of disabled children is not seen as a threat to the education of others?

Why does CSIE insist that all special schools should be closed?

This is essentially a human rights issue. Undoubtedly a number of special schools have first-rate facilities and committed, knowledgeable and experienced staff. No matter how exceptional the setting, however, the fact remains that special schools are segregating institutions. They deprive disabled learners of the opportunity to grow up, learn and develop with their peers. Such discrimination goes against recommendations in **international human rights instruments** (<http://www.csie.org.uk/inclusion/human-rights>).

It is often difficult to imagine a system different from the one we know. The thought of closing down all special schools may, for the time being, appear too radical to some. CSIE firmly believes this to be a necessary step towards greater social justice and draws strength and inspiration from effective models of full inclusion in this country and abroad. As more and more mainstream schools review their culture, policies and practices and as an increasing number of mainstream schools are willing and able to include all learners, a perceived need to preserve special schools is expected to diminish.

From a financial point of view, an additional benefit of closing special schools is this: the high cost of maintaining separate institutions for a small proportion of learners can be redirected to support inclusive provision. All running costs can be saved and staff time restructured to support learners in mainstream settings. In a well-documented report on a special school which closed, a simple and effective system is described: each member of staff who, in the special school, was responsible for a class of ten pupils, subsequently spent half a day a week supporting the inclusion of each of these pupils in a mainstream school¹.

1. Jupp, K. (1992) *Everyone belongs: mainstream education for children with severe learning difficulties*. London: Souvenir Press.

Inclusion is all right for some, but there will always be children for whom inclusion cannot work. Why insist that all means all?

It might be worth exploring what assumptions lie behind this question. What is it that is believed to make inclusion impossible for some pupils? If it is the culture and organization of mainstream schools as we know them, are these seen as fixed and rigid, set beyond the possibility of change? The notion of schooling emerged in a society where disabled people had no place and from which they were routinely intentionally removed. Society has been changing and disabled people are increasingly claiming their rightful place in it. How is education choosing to respond? What is education's answer to the claim that established systems act as disabling barriers for some children and young people? CSIE sees this as a human rights question, to which education is urgently called upon to find an answer.

It sometimes helps to consider the same issues in a different context. If you, the reader of this text, were to become disabled (and most of us will, probably in later life) how would it feel if you were denied access to your regular place of work or leisure? How would it be if you were told that, instead, you should attend an alternative place of work or leisure, which is tailor-made for your needs and full of other people like you? You may well value some contact with others who are, for example, wheelchair-users or partially sighted, but would you be happy to have this instead of your regular contact with existing friends and colleagues?

Let us now return to the issue of schooling for disabled learners. **If it is thought that a pupil "cannot access the curriculum" is it, in principle, better to turn the pupil away or to make every effort to make the curriculum relevant and accessible to this pupil?** Please allow us to reiterate: inclusion is not easy, but it is possible. For all learners. In its autumn 1995 bulletin (volume 2, number 2) the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, at the Graduate School and University Center of The City University of New York, reported the following statement from the Ontario School District:

"All students with disabilities who live in the school district have the opportunity to be totally included in the regular classroom and the extracurricular activities of their school. The only criteria for a student to attend any of our six elementary schools, our middle school or our high school is they must be breathing."

Inclusive education for some but not others is simply not inclusive education. After all, seeing disabled people as essentially different from non-disabled people is only one way of meaning-making; it focuses more on difference than on sameness. **We are all good at some things and need help with others. And we probably all find it frustrating if other people define us by what we need help with.**

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What is wrong with 'special education' and special schooling?

For many students and parents, enrolling in a special school tends to be a default rather than a positive, fully informed 'choice'—often because of the unwillingness of some schools to welcome and teach some students. Special schools thereby act as a 'safety valve' for schools' failure to be responsive to the diversity of students in their communities (those who do not 'fit' the system). As long as such segregated facilities exist, 'mainstream' schools are absolved of their responsibility to teach all students. Canadian educator and leader on inclusive education, Dr. Gordon Porter argues that this approach is detrimental to the whole education system and is indicative of poor education policy:

"...a system that encourages schools and teachers to abandon children and youth who have learning challenges is not good policy. Presuming that any child with special needs must be sent to a special program erodes the professional stature of teaching as a profession. Individual teachers may need support in a number of areas but their professional and ethical responsibility is to teach all children. Defining the regular classroom a place for "ordinary" learners and putting unrealistic pressure on school systems to develop a parallel system for all those thus abandoned also takes the focus off efforts for school improvement. It is bad educational policy, and in the long term it is not financially sustainable, as the struggles over funding issues experienced in many parts of Canada demonstrate."
<http://www.inclusiveeducation.ca/documents/2MakingCanadianSchoolsInclusiveGPorter.pdf>

It is not uncommon to hear claims that special schools/units/classes provide disabled students with better educational opportunities and resources. Some points to consider are:

- Teachers working in 'special' education contexts do not necessarily have 'special'/additional training. Similarly, teacher aides are not required to have any training to work in these contexts.
- There may be easier access to certain resources and therapists, however therapy can be and is provided in ordinary school settings. If therapy is easier to access in segregated settings we can ask why this happens and what changes are needed to ensure that therapy is just as readily accessed in ordinary schools.
- **The social aspects of schooling are very important. Whenever disabled students are segregated from their peers, both parties miss out.** Disabled students' access to the potential pool of friends is limited to those in their special school/class/unit, and other students are denied the opportunity to get to know, develop relationships, and learn to live with diverse groups of people. This affects students during school years, and into adult life. Students with disabilities can, if they wish, still have opportunities to develop friendships with other disabled students.
- Research to date (e.g., Crawford, 2004; MacArthur et al., 2005; Rustemier, 2004) indicates that **inclusive education contexts provide more effective education than segregated settings for all students.**

We know that many schools in NZ and internationally are providing quality education for their students, regardless of disability and other aspects of diversity. For example, in their study of including students with 'high needs,' ERO (2010) found that 50% of the 229 participating schools demonstrated "mostly inclusive practice" (p. 1). ERO attributed this to: "ethical leadership and standards; coordinated and informed approaches; innovative and flexible practice" (p. 1). Principals' and teachers' values and ways of thinking about students and their right to learn are also critical factors in inclusive education. The ERO findings indicate that schools can welcome and be responsive to all students, and thus questions the need to maintain a dual system of education that perpetuates the perception that there are 'two kinds of students'. The Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education concludes:

*"No matter how exceptional the setting, however, the fact remains that special schools are segregating institutions. They deprive disabled learners of the opportunity to grow up, learn and develop with their peers. Such discrimination goes against recommendations in **international human rights instruments**."* (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2012).

I don't know how to teach students with disabilities/I am not a special education teacher

Some teachers feel unprepared to teach some students, and these teachers need to be well supported. Other teachers view all students as their responsibility and have the confidence and knowledge to teach all students who come into their classes. They also know how to work with other professionals and with parents and the students themselves to share knowledge and information that enhances student achievement. These teachers do not differentiate between 'two kinds of children,' normal-abnormal, regular-special needs, able-disabled, but others do. Why is this? The disability research suggests that we learn about these ideas through experience and history - we 'socially construct' ideas about disability and normalcy. 'Disabled' and 'normal' are not concrete entities, they are ideas that we construct ourselves. Some teachers only see 'children and young people' in their classes, others see 'normal and abnormal'. A useful resource to consider this point further is I Am Norm, <http://www.iamnorm.org/home.aspx>.

Teachers are trained to work with children and young people, and teachers don't usually get to choose who is in their class. It is therefore important that teachers have opportunities to keep up to date with current thinking and practice in any aspect of teaching—use of technology, numeracy initiatives, curriculum developments, understanding the rights of disabled students. No teachers complete their training with all the knowledge and skills they will require throughout years/decades of a teaching career. Nor can teachers be expected to know everything. However, teachers can learn how to work with a diverse student group, and they can learn to work collaboratively with other professionals to share knowledge and skills. For example, a teacher can work with a specialist teacher in the area of vision impairment to learn how to teach a student who is blind. Teachers can also learn how to work effectively with teacher aides in the classroom so that all students learn well and have a sense of belonging. We would not want to go to a doctor who qualified in the 1970s and has not kept up to date with pharmaceuticals, medical knowledge, medical technology and so on. As professionals, it is the duty of teachers to keep up, and the duty of the education system to ensure that there are opportunities for teachers to keep learning. When teachers learn to work with diverse student groups they become part of a process of capacity building in schools and school systems that leads to improved learning for all.

How can we work with special schools?

Some special schools in New Zealand do not enroll young children any more, and have been working to change their role away from a place where children are taught separately to support inclusive education. Those working as support professionals with special schools can be true to their own inclusive values by being part of this change of role.

For this to be effective, all teachers need to have a good understanding of regular education, regular schools and classrooms, and of the New Zealand curriculum. Most importantly, their "working paradigm" with all students needs to be grounded in inclusive values. This means having a commitment to the local school as the right place for all children and young people to learn. It also means that ideas about "special education" need to be critiqued and rejected. A "special education" paradigm or way of working and thinking has historically associated disability with deficits and low expectations for student learning. This kind of thinking can create barriers to achievement. Gordon Porter (2008) says:

"Traditional special education, typically carried out by specialist teachers and in isolation from other children in special classes or special schools, has failed in several ways. First, it has failed to produce results. Students who experience segregated special education are not prepared for fulfilling lives in their communities when their education is finished. Research in Canada has indicated that they do less well than similar children who go to regular schools. There is nothing surprising in this. A segregated school program does not prepare young people to be part of the community and society when they become adults. Growing up and interacting with their peers does that." <http://www.inclusiveeducation.ca/documents/2MakingCanadianSchoolsInclusiveGPorter.pdf>

He/she can't learn

All children can learn, including students who have very complex educational needs. The challenge for teachers is to ensure their students have the high expectations, the positive attitudes and the quality learning environments needed to learn well.

This statement blames the child and takes the focus off the teacher as the person responsible for supporting children's learning. Going back to the first question above about "what disability is", if we say a child cannot learn, we are constructing a barrier (we could refer to this barrier as "low expectations" or a "self-fulfilling prophecy") that will effectively prevent them from learning. **All children are capable of learning and all children have rights to belong at school and in the community, and to learn alongside their peers.** Education is a right for all children, and it is important to position discussion about disability and education within a framework of rights. Considering children's rights puts them in a stronger position than focusing solely on their 'needs'—every one of us has needs, and part of education's purpose is to be responsive to all children's needs, so that their rights to education can be met.

The questions for teachers are, what needs to be learned through the curriculum, and how can children best be supported to learn well? "He can't learn" could, therefore, be rephrased as "I need to work out how he can be at the centre of the curriculum", or "I need to collaborate with others to work what he needs to learn in order to have a good life in our school, and in the community, now and in the future".

That won't work

This statement comes into the same category as, "He can't learn". Dismissing a suggestion on the basis of an assumption that it won't work, without a willingness to try it, creates a barrier to learning for any student. Inclusive schools are constantly on the move, asking questions about how to teach all students well. This involves keeping an open mind to new approaches to teaching and learning, and to new ways of engaging students. A better approach might be to say, "Let's try a different approach", or to ask, "Can we try a different way?". If teachers are uncertain about whether something will work or not, they can trial it within an acceptable time period. If it doesn't work, adapt or change the approach.

We don't have the resources

Resources are just one part of the equation to support the development of inclusive schools. This is a complex issue as internationally, and in NZ, some schools with few resources are doing positive work in the area of inclusion. These schools illustrate the critical importance of an inclusive values system as a vital starting point. Some students in our education system present challenges and require more time, effort, and resources. Only some have disabilities, and not all students with disabilities fit into this category. Responding in respectful, thoughtful, and constructive ways to students who require additional support is part of a teacher's role. See <http://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/IE%20few%20resources%202008.pdf> for some ideas about how inclusion can be a goal when there are few resources.

Including 'special needs' students in regular classes will disadvantage the 'other 28 students'...

The key questions are how anyone could know this, and where is the evidence? All students learn in different ways, at different paces, and at different levels. Equally, students behave in different ways. No one child has a greater right to be in class, and those who have a disability label do not have a lesser right than others. It is unfair and discriminatory to suggest that in a diverse classroom disabled students should not have a place. The research also suggests that teachers who learn to work with diverse groups of students develop in positive ways as teachers (MacArthur, 2009).

No one knows who/what a child will become, and it is unfair to pre-judge the life chances of some children on the basis of a facet of their humanity. A **presumption of competence**, on the other hand, says that every child has strengths, interests, and CAN learn. This suggests that it is the task of the teacher to get to know each student, find out what s/he is good at and loves, and provide opportunities for her/him to reveal her/his competence.

“As a society we exclude disabled people from mainstream - making them live in special homes, educating them in special school, shut away from the rest of us. It’s done under the pretext of ‘we think it’s best for them’ but really? If we educate children in separate settings, how are they to know how to integrate into society properly when they reach adulthood? And if non-disabled children don’t grow up alongside disabled children, surely they will perceive them as different. If they have never come across someone with autism how you are expected to know how they communicate or how you communicate with them? It seems to me that educating children separately just stores up problems for the future for all of us.”

‘Hidden in Plain Sight’, 2011, Mike Smith, Lead Commissioner with Equality and Human Rights Commission, United Kingdom.

‘Hidden in Plain Sight’ is a report from The Equality and Human Rights Commission. This was an inquiry into disability related harassment.

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Other Related Resources

Enabling EducationNetwork. This is an excellent website which provides access to a wide range of resources relevant to inclusive education. EENET is an inclusive education information-sharing network, open to everyone. EENET helps a wide range of people to access information and encourages critical thinking, innovation and conversations on issues of inclusion, equity and rights in education. <http://www.eenet.org.uk/index.php>

Department of Education, Newfoundland Labrador Canada. A useful website (this school district is undertaking a planned movement towards an inclusive education system) based on The Index for Inclusion: Newfoundland Labrador School District – Inclusive Education (See: Role of teachers in inclusive schools, and the article by Gordon Porter). Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/inclusion.html>

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