



Inclusive Education and Child-Friendly Schools¹

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The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) declares that all girls and boys in the world are entitled to the right to survival; the right to development (including the right to be educated); the right to protection from all forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and the right to participation in matters that affect their lives and that prepare children to take on increasing roles of responsibility as they mature.

The Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) concept is grounded in the CRC and represents a holistic, system-wide approach to improving educational quality that places the child at the center of education reform. Because of social, political, and cultural contexts of countries, the Child-Friendly School approach is flexible by design. However, stakeholders in countries implementing CFS hold a deep commitment to child rights; and they frame their reform efforts within the Child-Friendly concepts of *access, respect, and quality*, as well as the dimensions of (a) inclusion; (b) learning effectiveness; (c) health, safety, and protection; (d) participation; and (e) gender responsiveness. These concepts and dimensions interact and reinforce each other through country-specific CFS policies and practices.

Much is being learned about CFS dimensions and how they interact to create Child-Friendly Schools. The CFS dimension briefs are intended to summarize these broad dimensions of education quality as the research and literature have discussed them to date.

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1. What is Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education ensures that every child, regardless of gender, physical and social attributes, intellectual status, emotional challenges, linguistic backgrounds, or special needs, receives a high-quality education (UNICEF, 2009). Inclusive schools are one approach to meeting the fundamental human right of education for all children. An inclusive school starts with stakeholders actively seeking out all eligible children for enrollment. Once enrolled, it helps children stay in school and attend regularly. This means that fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory rules for accessing school are necessary but not sufficient. There must also be strategies in place to address the barriers that prevent children from participating and being successful in school (UNICEF, 2009).

The goal of inclusive education is to improve broad, systems-based approaches while focusing specifically on individuals. In any school in the world, there are likely to be students with “special needs.” The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) organizes such needs into three categories (2007):

- Students with disabilities or impairments viewed in medical terms as organic disorders attributable to organic pathologies (e.g., in relation to sensory, motor, or neurological defects). The educational need is considered to arise primarily from problems attributable to these disabilities.
- Students with behavioral or emotional disorders, or specific difficulties in learning. The educational need is considered to arise primarily from problems in the interaction between the student and the educational context.
- Students with disadvantages arising primarily from socio-economic factors. The educational need is to compensate for the disadvantages attributable to these factors.

OECD’s organizational framework is helpful in understanding those students who may have special needs in schools, but the broader “systems” approach to inclusive education does not limit inclusivity to students with the challenges faced above. Rather, inclusive education “focuses on all children and young people in schools; it is focused on presence, participation and achievement ... [in addition,] an inclusive school is one that is on the move, rather than one that has reached a perfect state” (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006, p. 25). To this end, inclusive education attempts to create systems that respond to students’ needs. Students may have the characteristics of those described above by OECD; or, they may be gifted, religious minorities, or older or younger than their classmates.

The need for inclusive education is pressing. According to UNESCO (2007) monitoring report data, there are more than 70 million out-of-school children in the world. Many of these children might be considered “marginalized” according to the data above. Children who are not in school will never enjoy the private and public benefits of education.

2. Ensuring Inclusive Education: Key Considerations

Inclusive education is both a “top down” and “bottom up” initiative. It focuses on system changes that involve multiple stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and students. At the same time, inclusive education is concerned with specific students. From a broad perspective, policy, positive school climate, and access initiatives are all necessary to create welcoming schools for all children. Once in schools, child-friendly and flexible pedagogies, along with social supports, can make the day-to-day educational experiences of all children rewarding.

2.1 Steps to ensuring inclusive education

Diagram 1 (below) outlines the necessary steps to help a child access her or his educational rights and participate in a high-quality program. This diagram is not an exhaustive list of elements needed for inclusive education, but it provides a general outline and illustration of the multiple layers of stakeholder support needed to create inclusive, child-friendly schools.

Diagram 1: Inclusive Education Process



2.1.1 National and local policies support diverse learners

All stakeholders are responsible for creating education systems that can benefit all students. Ministries of education, administrators, and local education units start the process by ensuring that all students have physical access to schools. Student presence in schools may be accomplished by reducing physical barriers; but psychological, economic, and cultural barriers must also be removed as well.

2.1.2 Schools actively seek out students for enrollment

Inclusive schools have clear policies actively to seek out students for enrollment. Students who do not attend school because of language barriers, disability status, or safety fears can be both identified and recruited to attend school. Overcoming non-attendance necessitates partnerships between education officials and community members (parents, relatives, and friends of out-of-school children).

2.1.3 School climate is welcoming and is physically accessible and psychologically safe

Once in school, students need to feel psychologically and physically safe to be included. This requires entire school inputs, including behavioral expectations for children, teacher education, and administrator support of school climate measures. In the classroom, teachers may present new information in a variety of ways to reach diverse learners (CAST, 2008).

2.1.4 Classroom practice is designed to support all learners

One way to ensure that all learners have access to education is through the concept of “universal design.” Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a philosophy and practice that asks teachers to design instruction so that the widest possible audience may be successful. The UDL approach typically focuses on flexibility in presentation and response in order to improve the learning of all students. For example, within a classroom a teacher may adjust the level of challenge for a particular student in a given assignment while still providing the child with full access to the curriculum. For some students, however, a more comprehensive approach to accommodation may be necessary. Accommodations are changes to standard activities that may be necessary to help a student learn the standard curriculum. Many of these may be covered through inclusive approaches (e.g., a child may be given additional time to finish an assignment), but some may require additional resources, such as supplemental support staff or learning materials. In short, classroom practices in inclusive classrooms provide multiple paths by which students can access curriculum and participate in learning.

2.1.5 Parents participate in learning process and school management

Often, the most knowledgeable person about a student is her/his parents. Parents understand the child's history in school, learning style, and personality. Inclusive schools enlist parents as partners in the learning process. Sometimes this partnership takes the form of seeking consultation from parents, but inclusive schools may also enlist parents as volunteers to facilitate inclusion or require their support on supplemental learning activities at home.

2.1.6 Additional support is provided

For students who require supplemental support, additional help with academic and social skills may be provided by a professional or volunteer outside the classroom. Further, these students may require modifications to the regular curriculum to allow for learning at a rate that benefits the child.

Although supplemental help may be present, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students should weigh the benefits and drawbacks to receiving supplemental help outside of the regular classroom. If the child will miss other valuable instruction or social experiences, supplemental help and curriculum modifications should be carefully considered.

For a very few students with the most significant disabilities or disadvantages, full-time participation in the regular classroom may not be possible. For these students, support teams of teachers, parents, administrators, and other professionals can decide on an alternative curriculum and school environment that might support the child. However, every opportunity should be made to connect the child's curriculum with that of other students (all children will be living in the same country as they grow older, so they should have access to the same skills and knowledge). Further, opportunities to socialize with a wide variety of children are very important for both groups of students – those with special needs and those without special needs. The social isolation sometimes experienced by children in "special" classrooms is contrary to inclusive education principles.

3. CFS Examples of Inclusive Education

Examples of inclusive education can be found in a global evaluation of Child-Friendly Schools (Osher, Kelly, Tolani-Brown, & Chen, 2009). Full inclusion of all students requires great effort and resource availability. In this brief, Guyana and Thailand are highlighted, since they demonstrate countries that are "on the move" in creating inclusive environments (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006).

3.1 Guyana

Guyana has been evaluating its CFS initiatives since 2008. Guyana's educational authorities noted that one barrier to accessing schools was that parents could not afford to buy children food at school. To meet this demand, Guyana implemented a school feeding policy and program. This program, implemented at the Ministry level, created new access to schooling for poor and marginalized children.

At the same time, children with disabilities faced physical barriers at school. Despite efforts to improve physical access to schools, many Guyanese facilities were sub-standard. Children with physical disabilities, in particular, were unable to access school buildings and grounds.

However, Guyana overcame tremendous barriers to schooling by creating open enrollment policies. Such policies helped to mitigate past discrepancies in enrollment by gender. Under new Guyanese policies, both girls and boys are encouraged to attend school. Guyana's Child-Friendly Schools established policies about educating all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, gender, disability, or religion. By creating policies that are aimed to serve "all" children, Guyana established universal access and enrollment possibilities. At the same time, by naming specific groups, they ensured that traditionally marginalized groups remained at the forefront of educational considerations.

Guyanese teachers also focused on the importance of school attendance. Teachers in the CFS program emphasized the importance of school attendance to their students, and focused on trying to make school a more positive experience for children. By helping children to enjoy their time at school and focusing on the importance of attendance, rates improved over the course of the project.

Inclusiveness was also reflected in the curriculum taught to students. One hundred percent (100%) of principals surveyed in Guyana noted that children were taught about the history and culture of diverse cultures, races, genders, and ability statuses within Guyana. Such inclusive curriculum honors the presence and allows for authentic and experience-based learning of a wide variety of students. According to students, teachers were mostly fair and balanced in terms of expectations and opportunities for males and females in class.

3.2 FYR Macedonia

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) committed to inclusive education in 2008. This commitment came in the wake of numerous policies designed to engage the learning of children typically on the margins. FYR Macedonia now has laws that provide for instruction in different languages. The country has schools that deliver instruction in the Macedonian language, the Albanian language, and (in rare cases) both languages. Further, children from other language minority populations have the opportunity to take home language courses in primary schools (although Macedonian is the primary language of instruction).

In addition, the Macedonian government and civil society leaders are implementing a series of social and financial supports to encourage the attendance of Roma learners. Families are given small financial allowances when their children attend school. Further, textbooks are provided to children free of charge, and supplemental snacks and clothes (when needed) are provided to Roma students. Finally, transportation allowances are given to several families to help offset costs of public transportation to and from school.

Third, Macedonia is engaging teachers in new and innovative ways. Beginning in 2011, faculties of education (called “departments of education”) at Macedonian universities are engaging in training on how to create syllabi that reflect inclusive environments. Further, in-service teacher training will be conducted by professors of education in FYR Macedonia, with support from external consultants.

Finally, Macedonia is engaging international consultants to assist in creating a parent center for parents of children with disabilities. The purpose of the parent center is to engage parents in advocacy training so that they might better understand their children’s right to inclusive education in Macedonia. Recommendations for inclusive faculties and parent centers are the direct result of Miske Witt & Associates’ work in FYR Macedonia.

4. Conclusions

As noted above, inclusive education is both a “top down” and “bottom up” initiative. Case studies and research demonstrate that a multi-faceted approach is needed in order to create inclusive schools. Often, schools may be very strong in one area of inclusive education (e.g., policy), but may need improvement in others (e.g., gender-sensitive teaching). As a dimension of Child-Friendly Schools, inclusiveness requires a comprehensive approach to improving access, climate, and teaching for all students. This can only be done through partnerships among policy makers, administrators,

parents, teachers, and students. Inclusive education is not easy to implement, but it holds great promise as a structure for addressing children's rights to quality schooling.

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For Further Information

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