

Inclusion / Integration

Is There a Difference?

By Bryan Harman

As our children with labels enter the education system, we often hear the words “integrated” or “included” to describe the classroom setting they will experience. In some cases the terms are used interchangeably, referring to children being “integrated into a regular classroom” and “included into a regular classroom.” There are, however, significant differences between the two. Knowing these differences can help us advocate for an inclusive environment that will help all children learn.



Integration models assume there is something wrong that must be fixed in order to fit into the present system. The supports and adaptations that occur are put in place to force a child into an existing classroom setting. The child must adjust to these adaptations or fail. The child is “going” to school.

Successful models of inclusion believe that ALL children are different, and ALL children can learn. There is nothing about a child that needs to be “fixed” in order for that child to fit into a system. The school system, as a whole, is enabled to change in order to meet the individual needs of ALL learners. Children are “participating” in school.

How can you tell the difference?

The biggest clue for determining whether a school is integrating or including students is in the language that is being used. If school personnel talk about extra adaptations or services to help the child fit into a classroom, it is integration. References to overcoming problems, acquiring functional abilities and support worker for the child will be used. Look at the Individual Education Plan (IEP). If the IEP focuses on strategies to help a child fit into a classroom, this is integration.

Inclusive schools and classrooms talk about helping everyone. School personnel will emphasize how the classroom/school will be changed to support the success of a child. The talk will be about how the extra adaptations and services will benefit everyone. Celebrating diversity, helping everyone and having a support worker for the class are key. When looking at the IEP, strategies will be used to adapt and improve the classroom so that all students achieve success. Inclusion is about helping everyone.

How to assist your child’s school to be inclusive?

Inclusion is about building relationships. In order to assist a school to become inclusive, relationships must be built. Your role is to facilitate this process by building relationships with the principal and teachers well before your child enters the system. If possible, start by offering to volunteer at the school, and make sure you bring your child whenever you go. This allows the school to get to know your child, which will lessen any fears that the school may be having.

As your child grows closer to enrolling in the school, start talking about when would be a good time to begin transitioning into Kindergarten. You might like

to share articles you have read about how inclusion benefits the whole school and community, or offer to talk to the school staff about inclusion. Be prepared to talk about these benefits at any time, including outside of school. Learn how the funding mechanisms in your province and school system work. This will help you talk to teachers and administrators about how extra supports will not only benefit your child, but other children as well . Always be clear that your intention is that your child will attend the school. Use phrases like “when (name) attends”; not “may he/she attend” to show the school your intentions. You are not asking permission, but rather want to begin to build a team to support your child’s inclusive education.

When your child starts school, be a resource person. You know your child better than anyone else, so make sure the school is comfortable calling for help. Offer to talk to the staff or the students. Give teachers permission and encouragement to try innovative strategies to include your child and enhance the school experience of ALL students. Always assert that your child is a learner – with great potential.

If you experience resistance to your child being supported in an inclusive education setting, know the rights you and your child have to an inclusive education, and be prepared to stand up for them.

Know your local legislation, regulations and school division policies regarding inclusion. You may be required to advocate on behalf of your child if things aren’t working out. Find out who to talk to if policies are not being followed. If you find yourself in a situation where you need to meet with the school, the division, or others, you should always bring an advocate with you. This person will act as a second set of ears and help you recollect the conversations at a later time. This is very important as an advocate will see and remember things that you will miss.

Finally, be prepared to advocate at every school your child attends. Inclusion may be a very long process. If your child is the first to be included in your school or community you may find yourself repeating your efforts as your child transitions from one level of school to the next. If possible, make efforts to connect with families whose children will follow yours through the system so they are aware of your efforts and progress, and can build on them as their children enter the system. Remember that schools need to learn as well as teach. Once schools realize that inclusion will increase the academic performance and well-being of ALL students, they will be more than willing to work towards making inclusion a reality.

Integration vs Inclusion

needs of “special students”	rights of ALL students
changing/remedying the subject	changing the school
benefits to the student with “special needs”	benefits ALL students
professionals, specialist expertise, and formal support	informal support and the expertise of mainstream teachers

Conclusion: inclusion = good teaching for ALL