Education for Disabled Learners in Schools: Examples of Good Practice for Teachers

ERO looked at how well the education system is supporting disabled learners in schools. This guide provides practical advice and real-life examples of good practice for teachers to support the inclusion and learning success of disabled learners at your school.

How does good education make a difference for disabled learners?

Disabled learners have the same right to receive a quality, inclusive education in state schools as other learners. To thrive, they need to be fully included in all aspects of education. This might mean the curriculum, teaching, and physical environment need to be adapted. Like all learners, what works best is quality teaching in supportive environments, with strong parent and whānau partnerships.

When disabled learners receive high quality, inclusive education, it makes a real difference. They are more likely to achieve better social and learning outcomes, to complete secondary schooling, and to go on to further study and employment. Research also shows that inclusive practices lead to better social outcomes for their non-disabled peers.

> *When we talk about **disabled learners**, we mean children and young people with significant needs for ongoing support, adaptations or accommodations to support their education. Not all members of this community might identify with this language. We've used this term because it links to the New Zealand Disability Strategy.*

> "I love school, it's great and my teachers are great. I love being with the other students. I love being treated the same way as them and given the same opportunities. It is important to me to be included in all aspects – not just being present."
>
> **DISABLED LEARNER**

How well are disabled learners doing?

Our research found that while many disabled learners enjoy going to school, and are engaged in learning, a significant proportion are still experiencing exclusion, poor experiences, and poor outcomes at school.

→ Almost a third do not feel supported to learn in a way that suits them.

→ More than a quarter do not feel accepted for who they are.

→ Almost a third do not feel they belong at school and do not have good friends.

→ Only half of parents and whānau think their disabled child is progressing well as a learner and are happy with how their child's learning is being assessed and reported.

→ Only half of parents and whānau are happy with how well the school is supporting their disabled child to be included and to participate in school life.

→ Disabled learners with more complex needs have poorer experiences and outcomes.

What makes a difference for disabled learners?

Our research identified four key areas for improving education outcomes for disabled learners:

1. Effective leadership that has strong expectations for inclusion
2. **Quality teaching (including responsive curriculum and assessment) and supportive environments**
3. **Strong partnerships with disabled learners, parents and whānau**
4. Accessibility of school buildings and facilities

This guide focuses on areas two and three, which have particular importance for teachers. A separate guide has been developed for principals and leaders which covers leadership and accessibility of buildings and facilities.

In this guide, we'll briefly summarise what the evidence says about good teacher practices, and provide real examples of these practices in action from the teachers we spoke to. We've also included some reflective questions to support you and your team in building up your own inclusive teaching practices.

Key area: Quality teaching (including responsive curriculum and assessment) and supportive environments

What's really important?

Quality teaching and supportive classroom environments are key contributors to how inclusive and equitable learning at school is for disabled learners. We found six key aspects of quality teaching practice.

1. Expectations and building student confidence
2. Adapting curriculum and teaching
3. Planning the learning programme
4. Assessment and reporting
5. Tailoring the physical environment and the use of technology
6. Fostering social and emotional inclusion and wellbeing

We'll talk about the evidence, give examples of effective practice, and offer reflective questions for each of these.

1. Having high expectations, believing in disabled learners and helping build their confidence

What does the evidence say?

Disabled learners do well when their teachers have high expectations and design appropriate assessments that help to identify their strengths and inform progression planning.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

It's important for all adults that work with disabled learners to have a clear and shared understanding of how and when to stand back and allow space for individual learning and peer connections. At this school, teachers and support staff make sure that they don't unnecessarily interrupt social or independent learning opportunities for their disabled learners.

"We maintain expectations for students to be self-managing. We won't do what a student can do for themselves. We are mindful of not using teacher assistants in a way that gets in the way of independence and collaboration in the class or the playground."

TEACHER

Reflective questions: Do we have a good and shared understanding of how to support each learner's independence and engagement with peers? Do we intervene more often than we need to?

A culture of high expectations is having lasting impacts for a disabled learner, even after moving on to a different school. A key strategy used by his teachers was monitoring the level of challenge in his schoolwork, and talking with him about maintaining a good level of self-challenge.

"When the goals weren't high enough, the teachers would push him. At intermediate, he learnt to set himself challenges and he still uses that method."

PARENT

Reflective questions: Do we have high expectations for our disabled learners? How can we work with them to set and achieve challenging goals in their learning?

2. Adapting the curriculum and teaching to learners' strengths and needs

What does the evidence say?

Adapting the curriculum and teaching for disabled learners means actively tailoring the learning programme and resources. This includes ensuring the curriculum and teaching are culturally responsive to each disabled learner and their whānau. To do this well, it's necessary to have good knowledge of the individual learner and the aspirations of them and their whānau.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this school, specialist and class teachers work with the Level 1 expanded curriculum framework for literacy and numeracy to ensure that planning and assessment is highly responsive and actively promotes learner progress.

"Working with the extended framework keeps you focused on progress. Without it, you could slip along sideways. I don't think we ever have the attitude [that] they are who they are and that's as far as they are going to get – it's about having high expectations."

TEACHER

Reflective questions: How well are we supporting disabled learners within Level 1 of the curriculum? Do we need a better understanding of how to work with the extended framework to promote measurable, individualised learning success? (See the **Useful resources** *at the end of this guide for resources around the extended framework.)*

Preparing disabled learners with the skills for work and independent living is a key focus of this secondary school's curriculum. Specialist teachers work together with disabled learners and their whānau to develop and continually review a pathway plan from the time they start school. Learners and families are asked what a good life looks like in a number of life areas such as: where they live, transport, communication, health and wellbeing, employment, education, finances, relationships, hobbies, sports, clubs, and spirituality. Pathway planning then maps out which agencies they currently have connections with, identifies any barriers in their path, and defines the strategies and support they'll need to achieve their pathway goals. The plan then identifies a number of short-term goals, achievable in the next three to six months, and what their first steps will be toward achieving these.

Reflective questions: How much do we know about the short- and long-term goals of our disabled learners and their whānau? How well is their learning programme set up to support progress towards the learning and life outcomes that matter most to them?

3. Working as a team with SENCOs, specialists, and teacher aides in planning learning programmes

What does the evidence say?

Disabled learners do better when what they're learning is linked to what the rest of their class is learning. To make this work, it's important for teachers to:

→ work as a team with SENCOs, specialists, and teacher aides in planning the learning programme for disabled learners. This means having regular, quality discussions to share practice, progress, and strategies

→ plan for the best use of additional resources to maximise the presence, participation, and learning of disabled learners in the class. This includes thinking carefully around how best to work with teacher aides.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this primary school, there is a strong focus on coordinated, collaborative planning to support quality teaching for disabled learners. The school has found that it's crucial to prioritise time for key staff to meet up – not just grabbing time when they can. Specialist teachers, class teachers and teacher aides have regular pre-arranged meetings for rich, valuable discussions about learning goals, monitoring of progress, and sharing effective strategies and approaches. Teachers and teacher aides also participate together in professional learning, which means there is more shared language, understandings, and consistent practice across the adults in each class.

Reflective questions: Do I prioritise teamworking with the SENCO/LSC, specialists, and teacher aides to support disabled learners in my class? How can we improve the way we share practice, understandings, and strategies?

4. Adapting assessments and reporting on learning progress

What does the evidence say?

Assessment practices should reflect high expectations. They also need to be adaptable and individualised to clearly identify strengths and areas of development. Assessments should be used as a feedback loop to provide meaningful information to disabled learners and their whānau on their learning progress and next steps.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Learning support staff at this secondary school work with teachers to adapt assessments to support the success of disabled learners. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, being flexible about how assessments happen means all learners can benefit from appropriate assessment and planning. Engaging in professional learning and development (PLD) has been key to building staff confidence and competence in this area.

"We explain special assessment conditions to staff and do PLD on adapting certain assessments by giving them an alternative way – including by giving orally or visually."

SENCO

Reflective questions: How responsive and flexible are our assessment practices? Do we need to look for better ways to assess the learning progress of our disabled learners?

This secondary school has simplified the way it presents IEP goals to make the focus on literacy, numeracy, and key competencies clearer for families. They have also introduced a new communication assessment tool to better support goal setting and tracking of progress. The school involves parents and whānau in assessing the progress of their learners by having conversations to share the learning that is being observed, both at home and at school.

Reflective questions: Are our assessments clear, specific, and understandable for whānau? Do assessments directly inform next steps for progression?

5. Tailoring the physical environment and the use of technology

What does the evidence say?

Teachers can support participation and learning by being thoughtful and deliberate about arranging the classroom's physical space, equipment, and resources in response to disabled learners' needs. In some cases, this will involve incorporating assistive technology.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this primary school, teachers work with specialists to make tailored decisions about how to set up their classroom to meet the needs of disabled learners.

> "We use an occupational therapist to advise on adaptation of classrooms. We follow an ecological model. We are not putting support in for the individual child, we are about changing the ecology of the classroom."
>
> **SENCO**

Staff shared that making visible, physical changes to their classrooms has the added benefit of sending a strong message of inclusion to disabled learners and the wider school community.

Reflective questions: How accessible and inclusive are our classrooms for all learners? What big and small steps might we take in arranging our classroom to improve participation and learning of our disabled learners? How are learners supported to regulate sensory overstimulation in open/modern learning environments?

Teachers at this primary school use a range of assistive technology – including talk pads, clickers, and maths manipulatives – to support disabled learner engagement. When appropriate, learning resources such as core boards and assistive technology use the learner's first language to better support engagement, learning, and belonging.

Reflective questions: How might we improve the use of assistive technology to support engagement in learning and communication with peers? Are there staff who are confident working with this technology, or do we need to build capability across the school?

6. Classrooms that support participation and wellbeing

What does the evidence say?

Teachers can successfully foster an inclusive classroom environment with the use of deliberate, thoughtful strategies. Important practices for supporting the social and emotional inclusion and wellbeing of disabled learners include:

→ setting clear expectations for all learners. This should include being explicit about acceptable behaviour and positive, inclusive peer interactions

→ proactively addressing bullying and discriminatory behaviour

→ providing opportunities and spaces for positive peer relationships to be formed and nurtured.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this primary school teachers use a range of strategies to fully include disabled learners and promote social interaction with non-disabled peers. Teachers ensure disabled learners are consistently included in small group work, called on to contribute to class discussion, and have their turn at performing class leadership roles alongside their peers. Teachers buddy disabled learners with their non-disabled peers to support their participation in both classroom-based learning and small group programmes. Teachers also write "social stories" with disabled learners and their peers, and use these to promote friendship skills.

Reflective questions: Are we proactive about connecting disabled and non-disabled learners? How could we increase opportunities for peer connections in both learning and social contexts?

At this secondary school, teachers use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and practices to guide inclusive teaching practice. Disabled learners are fully mainstreamed alongside their non-disabled peers. Cooperative peer-learning groups are used in class.

Deliberate group strategies, for example, having one scribe for group work, are used to ensure all students can participate and contribute.

*Reflective questions: Do we have a good understanding of cooperative group work strategies and their value for disabled learners? Would it be beneficial to build our kete of practices? (See the **Useful resources** at the end of this guide, for links and guidelines around UDL practices.)*

There are positive impacts when teachers have the necessary resources and training to support learners' sensory and self-regulation needs. In this school, there is a school-wide understanding of how to use "zones of regulation" with disabled learners, and teachers encourage the use of fidget resources, weighted blankets and low sensory spaces for students to self-soothe. Teachers report that these strategies have had a positive impact on disabled learners' independence and resilience.

Reflective questions: How do we support disabled learners to self-regulate in ways that respond to their specific needs? How can we grow our knowledge, understanding and resources in this area?

Key area: Strong partnerships with disabled learners, parents and whānau

What's really important?

Parents and whānau know their child best. To support disabled learners to succeed in their education, schools need to work in close partnership with learners and their parents and whānau. We found three key aspects of strong partnerships.

1. Getting to know the strengths, interests, and needs of individual disabled learners
2. Regular communication with parents and whānau, and involving them and learners in planning their learning programme
3. Collaboration and meaningful partnerships with Māori disabled learners, their parents and whānau

We'll talk about the evidence, give examples of effective practice, and offer reflective questions for each of these.

1. Getting to know the strengths, interests, and needs of individual disabled learners

What does the evidence say?

When teachers have a good understanding of the strengths, interests, and needs of individual disabled learners, they are better equipped to adapt the classroom learning programme in an appropriate and responsive way.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

This secondary school develops detailed learner profiles and shares these across key staff to support responsive curriculum planning. The profiles focus on disabled learners' strengths, interests, needs, preferred learning approaches, and effective teaching strategies. Learning support staff observe learners in class and support teachers to adapt the curriculum.

Reflective questions: Do we have strong knowledge of disabled learners' strengths, interests, needs, preferred learning approaches and effective teaching strategies? Do we need to grow our understandings by talking to learners, their parents, and whānau?

At this primary school, staff seek information about children's interests in order to use them as the context for learning across the breadth of the curriculum. Teachers seek out ways to bring key interests into learning experiences wherever possible, supporting learners' engagement and using these areas of interest to connect with families.

> "Every time … there is a new interest, we pick up on it and do the learning through that lens. [They're] used as the basis for maths, literacy and inquiry learning. For example, this child loves getting messy and getting into things. We started doing experiments with her. Saw the amazement she had. We feed back to her whānau, through Seesaw."
>
> **TEACHER**

Reflective questions: How do we use what we know about individual learners and their whānau in their learning programmes? How do we share and celebrate learning progress with families?

2. Regular communication with parents and whānau, and involving them and learners in planning their learning programme

What does the evidence say?

Disabled learners are more likely to progress and achieve well when they and their parents and whānau are involved in setting learning goals, defining success, and mapping progression and pathways in partnership with teachers and learning support leaders. It is also important for teachers to regularly communicate with parents and whānau to share information and progress, and to seek guidance on culturally responsive approaches to support their child.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

In a community that experiences a lot of housing transience, where families might change addresses and phone numbers frequently, this primary school uses a wide range of strategies to communicate with parents and whānau. These strategies are used to plan for, and review, disabled learners' progress. This supports teachers to keep in regular contact with families, as well as hear about any changes in learners' home settings.

"We have four IEPs a year. We try to get first ones up and happening by week two or three. We get to know families, get them in earlier, make connections and build rapport. We have struggled at times, putting them at ease and having them happy to come to school. We think about [what would work best] – is it a phone call, messenger, text, email or catching them at the gate? There are a range of ways we communicate with families [to be responsive to] what works best for each whānau."

SENCO

*Reflective questions: How successful are we in communicating regularly and meaningfully with parents and whānau of disabled learners? Do our families understand and engage with our planning processes? (See the **Useful resources** at the end of this guide, for a link around individual education planning.)*

A school has responded to parent feedback about the anxiety experienced by some disabled learners as they anticipate class changes in the new year. Teachers now use release time to meet with whānau and learners to get to know them and build trusting relationships prior to the learner joining their class. The school has also started planning and implementing graduated transitions in term one of the previous year, rather than in term four.

Learners spend up to three years with consistent teaching teams, which supports continuity of relationships and communication. Rich information and knowledge of each learner, gathered by teaching teams over three years, is handed over to the learner's new teaching team and supported with discussion.

Reflective questions: How have we been responsive to the feedback of parents and whānau of disabled learners? Do we need to be more deliberate about seeking and valuing their input on school processes?

3. Collaboration and meaningful partnerships with Māori disabled learners, their parents, and whānau

What does the evidence say?

When working with Māori disabled learners and their whānau, it is important that leaders, teachers and learning support staff demonstrate a collaborative and culturally responsive approach to supporting their child and addressing any issues and concerns.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At the start of the school year, specialist staff and teacher aides at this secondary school spend time getting to know students and their whānau. In addition to regular opportunities to meet with specialist staff, parents have the option of connecting with subject teachers, deans and pastoral workers, learning support coordinators, and Kaitiaki Māori pastoral staff. The school found that this individualised relationship-building at the start of the year has lasting positive impacts, particularly for whānau and tamariki Māori, as the relationship grows over time to be more focused on learning.

Reflective questions: Do we know if the whānau of our Māori disabled learners feel involved and well-informed about their child's learning programme? How might we facilitate stronger, culturally responsive connections and ways of working with disabled learners and their parents and whānau?

Useful resources

→ Learning Support delivery: A new model for delivering learning support (education.govt.nz)

→ Ministry of Education guides for schools:
TKI guides on inclusive education (inclusive.tki.org.nz) and SEonline (seonline.tki.org.nz)

→ Guidance on using the expanded curriculum framework for Level 1 of the New Zealand Curriculum:
Frameworks to expand and enhance Level One of the NZC (assessment.tki.org.nz)

→ Guides for developing Individual Plans or Individual Education Plans:

— General guidance (seonline.tki.org.nz)

— IEPs in secondary schools (seonline.tki.org.nz)

→ IEP Guidance for parents and teachers, developed by Parent to Parent with support from the MoE: IEP booklet (carematters.org.nz)

→ Guidance for Universal Design for Learning for building inclusive teaching practice in schools:
Guidance on TKI (elearning.tki.org.nz)

→ Other Universal Design for Learning guidelines endorsed by the Ministry of Education:
Guidelines from CAST (udlguidelines.cast.org)

→ UNICEF resource for inclusive education: UNICEF guidelines (unicef.org)

For more on our evaluation of education for disabled learners in schools, check out our website www.ero.govt.nz

→ Our full report: Thriving at school? Education for disabled learners in schools

→ Our short summary: Thriving at school? Education for disabled learners in schools – Summary

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the disabled learners and their whānau, teachers, and leaders who shared with us.

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