

What We Mean When We Talk about Inclusion

Moving away from short-term fixes

I am often struck by the seemingly polarised debate on inclusive education and the oversimplification of a subject that has fundamental consequences for our children and society. Special schools versus 'mainstream', advocacy organisations versus teachers. At Inclusion Ireland, we are often asked to take sides or contribute to this unhealthy framing, and it is a battleground we refuse to enter. Often it is the child's voice that is lost – repeating shameful historical patterns in Ireland of ignoring the ones we need to hear the most.

In 2024, it has never been clearer that we have a long road to travel to real inclusion. Time and time again we hear of disabled children forced to move schools because the supports are not available, children travelling 1.5 hours in a taxi to access their right to education, children on reduced timetables or even suspended. I am struck by the quote from Desmond Tutu: 'There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.'

In a world that seems to value quick fixes and sticking-plaster solutions, it is beyond time we demand upstream thinking from our leaders and politicians. It is always a danger in advocacy to tell a single story, when we should widen the lens and dare to think big. The questions we need to ask are complex: Does our society value all children equally? What role does patronage have to play? What kind of competencies will our schools need in order to support all children, no matter their race, religion, or disability? How can we build empathy and understanding that inclusion is a good thing for all children, not a charitable act? It suits a broken system to divide us, but together educators, children, families, and advocates need to be heard and to demand better.

To survive and thrive in a world that will be challenged by climate crisis and deepening economic divides, we need children to become young adults who are empathetic,



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This article from Inclusion Ireland says we have a long road to travel to real inclusion in education in Ireland. In a world that seems to value quick fixes and sticking-plaster solutions, it is beyond time we demand upstream thinking from our leaders and politicians. The article calls for a citizen's assembly on education, to figure out a pathway towards a more inclusive education system, one that includes every child.

creative, and understanding of difference. Doesn't inclusion teach us that? To be alongside our fellow humans in all their diverse glory and figure out a way to play together, learn together, and eventually live and work together.

At Inclusion Ireland, we have more questions than answers, and perhaps that is where we need to be as a society. To humbly say, we do not know, we haven't gotten it right yet, but we are willing to listen. For this reason we are calling for a citizen's assembly on education, where we can take stock and figure out a pathway towards a more inclusive education system. This path must include every child – especially those who experience multiple and intersectional barriers in accessing what should be a basic right: their right to education, and more profoundly their right to belong.



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