

Supporting students with disability in mainstream schools: Identifying key elements of quality reasonable adjustments

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1

The right to full inclusion in mainstream schools

- In Australia, students with a disability have the right to full inclusion in mainstream schools. This is embedded in Australian legislation and policy.
- The social model of disability proposes that inclusion occurs when barriers are removed and needs relating to a person's impairments are accommodated.
- One way to do this is by making **reasonable adjustments**.



2

Reasonable adjustments: Definition

“An adjustment is a **measure or action** taken to assist a student with disability to **participate** in education and training **on the same basis** as other students. An adjustment is **reasonable** if it achieves this purpose while taking into account the **student’s learning needs** and **balancing the interests** of all parties affected, including those of the student with disability, the education provider, staff and other students” (DET, n.d., p. 2)

<https://www.education.gov.au/nationally-consistent-collection-data-students-disability-guidelines>



3

Difficulties in Designing Reasonable Adjustments

- Lack of operational definition of reasonable adjustments
- Teachers and allied health professionals may lack understanding of reasonable adjustments (McKinstry et al., 2020)
- Limited guidance and training, with teachers reporting low confidence in their ability to design and implement adjustments (Mavropoulou et al., 2021; Page et al., 2024)
- Overreliance on access to and leaving responsibility with teacher assistants (Dickson, 2019; Iacono et al., 2019)
- Allied health therapy may contribute to exclusion of students with disability
- lack of communication with educators, activities not integrated
- singling out and removal of students during activities (Dickson, 2019; Iacono et al., 2019)



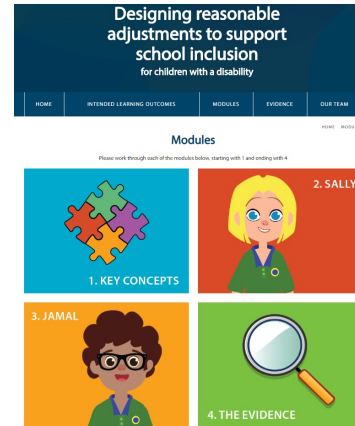
4

Overarching Research Program

Aim: To determine whether an online education package about inclusive education and reasonable adjustments that embeds the Social Model of Disability improves the quality of reasonable adjustments generated by stakeholders in the education of students with disabilities.

You can find the online education package here:

<https://www.reasonableadjustmentsinschools.org.au/>



5

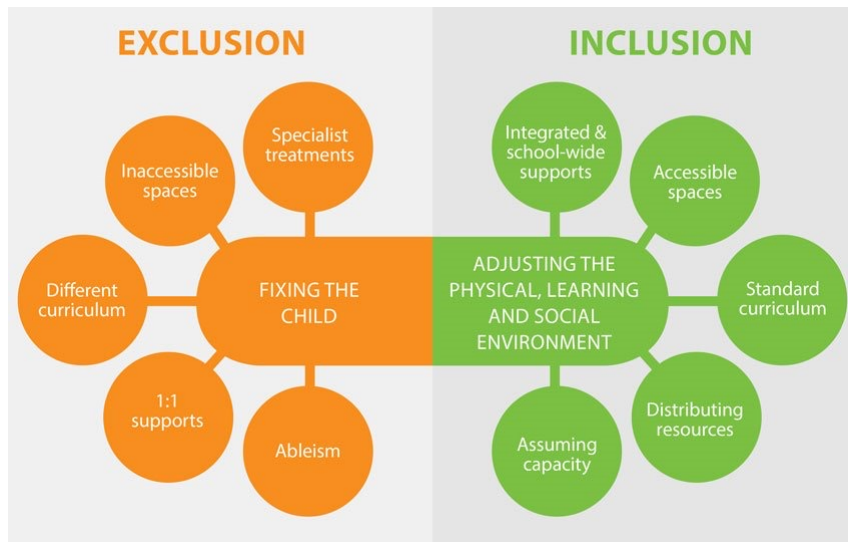
Social Model of Disability

- Differentiates between impairment and disability
- Disability is socially constructed: it comes from the interaction between an individual with impairment(s) and environmental and societal barriers
- Focus on identifying and eliminating **barriers to access and participation**
- Emphasis on creating **inclusive and supportive environments and resources**



6

Inclusion and the Social Model of Disability



7

What makes a quality reasonable adjustment?

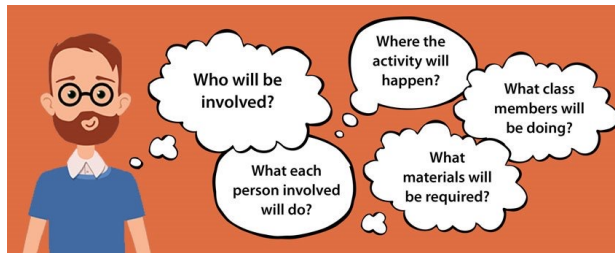
Participants: An expert panel was recruited through convenience sampling. Consisting of:

- 1 previous principal (mainstream and special education)
- 1 social worker and parent of school aged child
- 1 primary school teacher and parent of preschool child
- 1 speech pathologist providing services to school-age children and in schools



8

Information, learning activities, researcher designed student scenarios and reasonable adjustments



9

Sienna



- 8 years old, grade 2
- Loves looking through books and can recognize a few words.
- Loves to draw. When asked to write her name, can produce a few squiggles, but none are recognised as letters, except the first letter "S."
- Uses vocalisations, facial expressions, gestures, signs and a picture-based communication system on her iPad and a communication board
- Likes to use her iPad. Has a communication app, she loves her music apps. Sometimes turns them on during quiet work time.



10

Example scenario

Suresh, a young girl, is planning a picnic. The teacher gives the class the start to the story, writing on the board: Suresh and her friends, Carla and Yuma, are going on a picnic in a park. They need to decide what they will take to eat, how they will get to the park, and what they will wear.

Each group has a large sheet of butcher's paper and given different aspects to focus on. Possible options are represented in pictures. Each table must write the words that go with the pictures they have chosen for their part of the story.



11

Researcher Contrived Reasonable Adjustments

Examples:

Sienna will be assigned to the part of the story about healthy things to bring to the picnic. The teacher will include options for the table of students assigned this part of the story that are on Sienna's communication board, and she has previously used spontaneously.

The speech pathologist will be asked to develop a pictured social story for how to work collaboratively with the other students in her group, without disrupting them, so the teacher assistant can practice it with her prior to the activity.



12

Five dimensions

Authenticity	The extent to which the adjustment results in a genuine learning activity, rather than simply occupying the student.
Real Learning	The extent to which the reasonable adjustment will address specific need(s) so that the opportunity for the student to learn is enhanced.
Agency	The extent to which a student has choice or control in the activity
Strengths-based	The extent to which the reasonable adjustment provides opportunities to incorporate a student's skill strengths and interests to further build and extend their learning and development
Inclusion	The extent to which the student is learning or engaged with peers in the same activities - even if additional supports are provided, or if the level or specific type of learning outcome differs



13

Rating scale

Rate each individual dimension using the same 5-point scale

	Poor	Good
Authenticity	1	5
Real learning	1	5
Strengths based	1	5
Agency	1	5
Inclusion	1	5



14

Workshop observations

- A rich discussion arose between participants that identified a range considerations when assessing the quality of a reasonable adjustment in-line with the social model of disability
- The members of the expert panel were finding it difficult to rate the adjustment on the unidimensional scale
- Wanting to or making assumptions about information not included in the scenario
- There were multiple points of reference drawn from the varied experiences of the discipline areas represented



15

What makes a good reasonable adjustment in line with the social model of disability?

Inductive coding and analysis of the transcripts identified seven key themes:

1. The adjustment is available to all students
2. All students are doing the same activity
3. Collaborating with peers
4. The student has choice
5. It addresses student learning needs
6. The adjustment aligns with the learning goals of the task/activity/curriculum
7. Who is driving the adjustment is important



16

1. The adjustment is available to all students

Modification or additional support should be made available to all students in the classroom. That adjustments can have benefits for all students and can result in a whole classroom or whole school approach.

"I love the idea that they're still doing the same task. I felt it was a good reasonable adjustment to have the labels and the pictures, but to me it should've been applied across the board. Everybody should've gotten that resource".*

*quotes have been edited for this presentation for clarity



17

2. All students doing the same activity

Students with disability are engaged in the same learning activity as everyone else in the classroom. Additional support or modifications can be provided, but goal is to work towards same learning objectives. That the child is not being singled out, excluded or withdrawn from the activity.

"I thought that the instructions could be 'Please make sure everybody in your group has a turn? And here are some ways to do that'... I think that everybody could do the same thing".



18

3. Collaborating with peers

Being a real, valuable part of the group, and contributing to the group was seen as important. As was the opportunity for peer modelling and peer support

“That peer learning and modelling, she’s being excluded from that, because it’s being decided for her. But that nice spontaneous communication and friendship, that friendship that develops when we all like pineapples or whatever, that “Yes, I like that too” stuff, it’s excluding those sort of incidental things. But mainly, so that missed learning opportunities... ..that’s an exclusionary sort of practice”.

4. The student has choice

That the student is given the same choice and ability to express their own preference as other students.

“It’s aligned with what the class is sort of doing. But what she’s excluded from is, sense of agency, in actually choosing those words... .. So that when she’s actually there, she’s being excluded from making any of those choices”.



19

5. Addresses student learning needs

A quality reasonable adjustment considers the way the child learns and their learning goals. It provides and opportunity for the child to experience success and ensures they are not set up for failure.

This includes providing scaffolding or extra support where needed so that the child can participate in the activity alongside peers. Adjustments that don’t consider students skills and strengths can result in exclusion

“Some kind of adult support there to me looks like you’re actually scaffolding his inclusion in the group. And I think that it would require a lot of the group to include a student like Parri, who said he will probably get way laid with the insects on the field. He will be doing other things other than the task more than likely, and getting other kids to take responsibility for that is very difficult. And can set up, negative interactions with those kids”.



20

6. The adjustment aligns with the learning goals of the task or the curriculum

The adjustment made to task or learning activity is in line with the learning goal/curriculum and results in an authentic learning task and real learning for the student. That the task is not just keeping the child busy.

“ P: Because it didn’t seem to me that it was going to teach, it was going to help Parri achieve his learning, the learning goals for that. So, it’s including him in an activity, so making an adjustment to the activity, but

P: Yeah. for what outcome? Was my concern.

P: I put exactly the same, what is he getting out of that?

P: In terms of his learning?

P: Basically, it’s accommodating him. Again, which is not about the learning, it’s they’re accommodating, so he can be in there... .. he’s not actually really cognitively engaged with that, yeah”



21

7. Who is driving the adjustment

Teacher has knowledge of students needs and is able to adjust the task/activity to be inclusive of the student. The reliance on a teacher’s aid or external allied health professional was perceived as less inclusive and would be rated lower

“I would’ve thought that the teacher would develop the story and the speech pathologist would then look at it to make sure that it was potentially suitable for Sienna. As opposed to the speech pathologist developing this”.

Teacher and teachers aid or teacher and allied health professional working collaboratively was viewed as more inclusive.

“I gave it a four. For the reason that the education support staff and the teaching staff are working together. So it’s not just, you know, she’s not just being taught by the teacher’s aide”.



22

Key insights:

- Reasonable adjustments are **multidimensional** in nature
- Adjustments encompass aspects such as participation, engagement in authentic learning activities, collaboration, choice, alignment with learning needs and goals, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders
- Shift in focus from type to **nature and quality** of the adjustments
- Inclusion beyond the notion of students with disability being physically present in the classroom
- Reasonable adjustments and Universal Design for Learning
- The importance of who designs and implements adjustments
- Five dimensions model as a framework to guide collaboration and decision-making around adjustments



23

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24