

Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments



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The education of children with diverse backgrounds and abilities remains a major challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. In April 2000, the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, set as its second goal: "ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality." Realizing this goal means increasing school attendance and completion rates; eliminating bias within schools, national education systems, and curricula; and eliminating the social and cultural discrimination that limits the demand for schooling for children with diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Inequality in education remains a matter of concern for all countries, yet discrimination continues to permeate schools and educational systems. To bridge this gap, it is critical to sensitize teachers and education administrators about the importance of inclusive education. It is equally critical to give them practical tools to analyze their situation and ensure that all children are in school and learning to their fullest capacity, as well as ensuring equity in the classroom, in learning materials, in teaching and learning processes, in school policies, and in monitoring learning outcomes.

This Toolkit accepts this challenge and offers a holistic, practical perspective on how schools and classrooms can become more inclusive and learning-friendly. It builds on experience gained over many years and on the strategies and tools developed by many organizations and individuals working on inclusive education and, more recently, in the area of establishing Child-Friendly Schools. This Toolkit is meant to be user-friendly and a means of inspiration for teachers who find themselves working in ever more diverse classrooms. I hope you will find the Booklets in this Toolkit useful in gaining support for inclusive, learning-friendly environments and in creating and managing them through the full participation of educators, students, parents, and community members.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheldon Shaeffer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sheldon Shaeffer
Director, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education



Acknowledgements

The work of preparing this Toolkit was genuinely participatory and involved many education specialists, teachers, agency experts, and others from inside and outside of the Asian Region. Their names are listed below, and we would like to thank all of them for their contributions. Every single input and comment was thoroughly considered and contributed to the enrichment of the Toolkit.

In addition, The Life Skills Development Foundation in Chiang Mai, Thailand; the UNICEF Office for the Philippines, Manila; and UNICEF Islamabad/Baluchistan co-organized workshops with teachers to get their feedback on the Toolkit as a whole, each of its Booklets, and their tools. We found this interagency cooperation most fruitful and hope it will continue through this Toolkit's dissemination process.

We have also used ideas and tools from several sources, the most prominent of which are:

Child-to-Child: A Resource Book. Part 2: The Child-to-Child Activity Sheets, by Baily D, Hawes H and Bonati B (1994) and published by The Child-to-Child Trust, London.

FRESH: A Comprehensive School Health Approach to Achieve EFA. UNESCO (2002) Paris.

Local Action: Creating Health Promoting Schools. World Health Organization (2000) Geneva. Also valuable resources were the documents in the WHO Information Series on School Health dealing with violence prevention, healthy nutrition, and preventing discrimination due to HIV/AIDS.

Renovating the Teaching of Health in Multigrade Primary Schools: A Teacher's Guide to Health in Natural and Social Sciences (Grades 1,2,3) and Science (Grade 5), by Son V, Pridmore P, Nga B, My D and Kick P (2002) and published by the British Council and the National Institute of Educational Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms. UNESCO (2001) Paris.

UNICEF's Web sites on Life Skills as well as "Teachers Talking About Learning," New York. Accessible through <http://www.unicef.org>

We gratefully acknowledge the above sources and encourage users of this Toolkit to make use of them as well.

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Listed below are the many contributors who provided their valuable time and experienced insights into completing this Toolkit. If we have inadvertently forgotten someone, please accept our heartfelt apologies and sincerest appreciation for your valuable assistance.

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Overview of the Toolkit

An inclusive, learning-friendly environment (ILFE) welcomes, nurtures, and educates all children regardless of their gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other characteristics. They may be disabled or gifted children, street or working children, children of remote or nomadic peoples, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, children affected by HIV/AIDS, or children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

WHO CAN USE THIS TOOLKIT?

This Toolkit was written especially for **YOU!** You may be a teacher in a pre-primary, primary, or secondary level classroom; a school administrator; a student enrolled in a teacher-training institution or one of its instructors; or just someone wanting to improve access to schools and learning for children who usually do not go to school, such as those with diverse backgrounds and abilities. This Toolkit will be especially valuable for teachers who are working in schools that are beginning to change into more child-centred and learning-friendly environments, possibly due to reforms introduced by the Ministry of Education, a non-governmental organization (NGO), or another project.

One important concept that we must all accept is that "All Children Are Different," and all have an equal right to education, no matter what their background or ability. Many of our schools and educational systems are moving towards "inclusive education" where children with diverse backgrounds and abilities are sought out and encouraged to attend ordinary schools. On the one hand, attending school increases their opportunities to learn because they are able to interact with other children. Improving their learning also promotes their participation in family and community life. On the other hand, the children with whom they interact also benefit. They learn respect and to value each other's abilities, no matter what they are, as well as patience, tolerance, and understanding. They come to realize that each person is "special" and to embrace diversity and cherish it.

For us, as teachers, embracing such diversity in our students is not an easy task. Some of us may have large classes, and we may already feel overworked. Including children with diverse backgrounds and abilities in our classes often means more work, but it need not be so. All we need to do is to manage the differences among our children by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, planning lessons accordingly, using teaching strategies and adapting our curriculum to fit each child's abilities and background, and, most importantly, knowing how to mobilize our colleagues, parents, community members, and other professionals to help us provide a good quality education for all children.

This Toolkit is designed to help you do all of these! It provides you with useful tools to make your schools and classrooms more welcoming and lively places of learning for **ALL** children and teachers alike; places that are not only child-friendly but also teacher-friendly, parent-friendly, and community-friendly. This Toolkit contains a set of resource materials that you can use to think about your own situation and to start taking action by using some tools that have proven successful elsewhere, or by giving you ideas about what similar activities you can undertake. All of the Booklets in this Toolkit present ideas you can try. They also invite you to reflect on these ideas, discuss them with others, and, together with all the learners in your community, create a unique, dynamic, and inclusive learning-friendly environment.

This Toolkit, however, is not a definitive textbook, and it will not have an answer for every problem that you might face. To help you as much as possible, at the end of each Booklet we have also included lists of other resources you might find valuable. Please remember, however, that creating an inclusive, learning-friendly environment is a process, a journey. There are no set paths or ready-made "quick fix" solutions to follow. It is largely a process of self-discovery. It takes time to build this new kind of environment. But since "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," this Toolkit will help you take the first step, and then the second, third, fourth, and so on. Since you and your students will always be learning new things, it will never be finished. Yet, it will provide an ongoing challenge as well as enduring satisfaction to students, teachers, administrators, special educators, parents, and the community.

How CAN YOU USE THIS TOOLKIT?

This Toolkit contains six Booklets, each of which contains tools and activities that you can do by yourself (self-study) to start creating an inclusive, learning-friendly environment. Some of these activities ask you to reflect on (think about) what you and your school are doing now in terms of creating an ILFE, while others actively guide you in improving your skills as a teacher in a diverse classroom. You might want to try these individual activities first, so you can become familiar with what is an ILFE, how it can be created in your classroom and school, and its benefits.

Because creating an ILFE requires teamwork, there also are tools and activities that you can do with your colleagues and supervisors, with your students, as well as with your students' families and communities. These activities are the ones that will help you sustain important changes in your classroom and school, so they continue to be inclusive and learning-friendly.

This Toolkit's six Booklets can be used in two ways. For those schools that are already involved in becoming inclusive and learning-friendly, such as those working to become "Child-Friendly Schools," you might want to choose a Booklet or Booklets that will help you in some special way, such as working with families or communities or managing a diverse classroom. For those schools that are just starting on the path to becoming inclusive and learning-friendly, you might want to work through each Booklet, starting with Booklet 1 and moving through Booklet 6. The Toolkit is designed to help you each step of the way because each Booklet builds on the one before it.

In addition, although the term "school" is used throughout this Toolkit, this term means any formal or non-formal learning environment where pre-school, primary, or secondary-level education takes place. In this Toolkit, therefore, the term "school" is used broadly to cover both types of educational settings. These environments can be a formal school or even an informal class held under shady trees. Consequently, you can use this Toolkit if you're a professional teacher or simply someone who helps children with diverse backgrounds and abilities to learn in informal settings (such as classes for street children).

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN?

Through this Toolkit, you will learn what an “inclusive, learning-friendly environment” is and how your school and classroom can create such an environment (Booklet 1).

You will also learn how very important families and communities are to the whole process of creating and maintaining an inclusive, learning-friendly environment, as well as how to involve parents and community members in the school, and how to involve children in the community (Booklet 2).

You will learn what barriers exclude rather than include ALL children in school, how to identify those children who are not in school, and how to deal with barriers to their inclusion in school (Booklet 3).

You will learn how to create an inclusive classroom and why becoming inclusive and learning-friendly is so important to children’s achievement, how to deal with the wide range of different children attending your class, and how to make learning meaningful for all (Booklet 4).

You will learn how to manage an inclusive classroom including planning for teaching and learning, maximizing available resources, managing group work and cooperative learning, as well as how to assess children’s learning (Booklet 5).

Finally, you will learn ways to make your school healthy and protective for ALL children, and especially those with diverse backgrounds and abilities who are more prone to becoming ill, malnourished, or victimized (Booklet 6).

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Teachers and practitioners from around the world helped to develop this Toolkit. They include those who were directly involved in four Regional workshops and shared their tools and ideas for getting all children in school and learning. It includes those persons who have shared their knowledge and tools through other venues such as printed publications and the Internet. It includes those persons who served as “critical readers”

in reviewing early drafts of this Toolkit. And most importantly, it includes those schools and teachers from many countries who reviewed this Toolkit and provided valuable advice and additional tools for its improvement. Hence, you will be learning from many others. The tools in this Toolkit are being used in many schools in a wide range of countries, especially those located in the Asia and Pacific Region. One of the most important questions you can ask yourself in using the tools is: "How can I adapt this specific tool for use in my classroom or school?"

A NOTE ON TERMS

One challenge in developing this Toolkit was what terms should be used. Oftentimes, different terms are used to describe the same thing. Moreover, sometimes a term may imply an idea or feeling that is not intended. For example, we have avoided using any that would imply discrimination. We have also tried to keep the terms simple and the presentation itself as friendly and informal as possible.

In keeping with this Toolkit's theme, we have tried to use terms that are as inclusive as possible. Some of the most important terms that appear in this Toolkit include the following.

- ◆ The term "children with diverse backgrounds and abilities" is perhaps the most inclusive term in this Toolkit. It refers to those children who usually fall outside of (are excluded from) the mainstream educational system due to gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, religious, or other characteristics.
- ◆ The term "learning environment" means any formal or non-formal setting where children gain knowledge and the skills to use that knowledge in their daily lives. Learning environments may take the form of schools and colleges or even cultural centres, hobby centres, or social clubs.
- ◆ "Inclusive education" or "inclusive learning" refers to the inclusion and teaching of **ALL** children in formal or non-formal learning environments without regard to gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, religious, or other characteristics.

- ◆ “Learning-friendly” means placing the child firmly at the centre of the learning process. It also means recognizing that his or her total learning environment includes other actors (such as teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders) who guide a child’s learning and are learners themselves. A learning-friendly environment is one in which children benefit not only from learning by themselves, but also from the learning of others whose needs are also taken into consideration. For instance, a learning-friendly environment gives children a chance to participate in their learning. It also is an environment in which teachers are helped and empowered to learn, in which they use and adapt new teaching methods, and in which parents and community members are actively encouraged to participate in helping their children to learn and their schools to function.
- ◆ “Classroom” refers to the actual place in which children come together to learn with the help of a teacher. It may include, for example, formal classrooms in public schools, informal learning classes for child workers held under trees, classes at youth centres for children living on the street, or even home-based learning sessions for those children who cannot attend any other learning environment, either temporarily or permanently.
- ◆ A “teacher” is any individual who systematically guides a child’s learning within a specific formal or non-formal learning environment.
- ◆ The terms “student,” “learner,” or “pupil” refer to anyone who is participating in formal or non-formal learning. They are used interchangeably in this Toolkit.
- ◆ “Children with disabilities” includes those children with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities and who are oftentimes excluded from learning in schools. They are children who were born with a physical or psychological disability, or they have acquired an impairment because of illness, accidents, or other causes. Impairments may mean that children will experience difficulty seeing, hearing, or moving, and they may learn more slowly and in different ways from other children. In many countries, not all children who are identified as disabled are also identified as having special educational needs,

and vice versa. These two groups, therefore, are not identical. Children with disabilities are capable of learning, and they have the same right to attend school as any other child. However, they are often excluded from school altogether in many countries of the Asia-Pacific region.

- ◆ Students with “special learning needs” or “special educational needs” means children who require greater attention to help them with their learning. In most countries, this attention is delivered in either special or ordinary schools or classrooms. Many countries label different groups of students as having special educational or learning needs, which sets them apart from regular students. When these terms appear in the Toolkit, therefore, it acknowledges the existence of this labelling practice. However, it does **NOT** assume that there is any actual educational difference between students with special learning or educational needs and regular students.
- ◆ “Sex” refers to the biological differences between men and women.
- ◆ “Gender” refers to the social roles that are believed to belong to men and women within a particular social grouping; for example, “men as breadwinners” or “women as child caregivers.” Gender roles are created by a society and are learned from one generation to the next as part of a society’s culture. Because it is a socially learned perception (for instance, learned in the family or in school), anything associated with gender can be changed or reversed to achieve equality and equity for both men and women. In other words, we can change the gender roles of “women as child caregivers” to “women as breadwinners” and “men as breadwinners” to “men as child caregivers,” or even “men and women as breadwinners and child caregivers.”
- ◆ “Family” means the main social unit within which a child is raised, and “community” refers to the wider social group to which the child and family belong.

A NOTE FOR TRANSLATORS AND ADAPTERS

This Toolkit was developed originally in the English language. But for it to be used widely, it will need to be translated into different languages and adapted to fit different contexts. For those of you who will be given the task of adapting and translating this Toolkit, please remember the following important points.

Style, Tone, and Vocabulary

This Toolkit is meant to be inviting and user-friendly. For this reason, it is written in a very informal, conversational style, as if you were talking to a teacher rather than simply writing for her or him. You are encouraged to also use this style in your translation, instead of using a formal—often overly complicated—one.

This Toolkit is written in a positive and encouraging tone. We want to encourage teachers and others to want to learn more, rather than to be condescending and pointing out what they should be doing or are doing wrong. Once again, you are encouraged to use this type of tone in your translation.

Although this Toolkit was written in English, we “pre-tested” it at three Regional Workshops (in Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand) to see if it was understandable to persons whose native language is not English. In order to make it understandable, this Toolkit uses a very simple vocabulary. We intentionally tried **not** to use complex terms and “jargon” (that is, words or expressions that some professionals may understand, but which are difficult for others to understand). However, some special terms can be difficult to translate. For example, the term “gender” may not exist in your language, but it is important to translate it accurately. If you find terms that you are not sure how to translate, check with professionals or agencies who may already be using the term and may have already translated it. For instance, “gender” is a term that is widely used in the areas of education, population, reproductive health, and children’s rights. If educators in your country have not translated the term (or it is translated inaccurately), check with other national and international organizations that work in these areas to see how they have translated it.

Context and Content

We have tried to use case studies and other experiences from many countries within and outside of the Asian Region. However, this may not be acceptable for your national context, particularly if, for instance, teachers prefer to see examples from their own country because they feel that they are more relevant. In such cases, you may need to search out other examples and use these instead of the ones in this Toolkit. However, please make sure that they agree with what is being explained in the text.

Overall, this Toolkit's content must be meaningful in terms of the context of your communities. For instance, there may be a need to include other groups of children who are out of school in Booklet 3, or to provide concrete local examples of "gender" issues and relations to help readers to understand the concept. Don't be afraid to adapt the Toolkit's content in such ways to fit your community context.

In addition, this Toolkit's content must be relevant to the realities of school life in your country. For instance, in countries where multi-grade teaching is common, you may need to adapt certain activities or recommendations to this setting.

In adapting this Toolkit's activities, techniques, and case studies to fit your local community and school conditions, work with teachers who are already involved in developing child-friendly schools or inclusive classrooms. They can help you to identify what other (or more appropriate) activities, techniques, or case studies can be added to each of the Toolkit's Booklets and Tools. Don't be afraid to remove one specific activity or case study in the original Toolkit if you have a better one from your own community or school setting.

Finally, when this Toolkit is to be "repackaged," it needs to be durable and user-friendly (for instance, able to be photocopied easily, with individual booklets rather than one large, heavy volume). You should consult local teachers to see what they prefer the final Toolkit to look like.