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978-1-107-69595-5 - Sustainable Learning: Inclusive Practices for 21st Century Classrooms

Lorraine Graham, Jeanette Berman and Anne Bellert

Excerpt

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## Chapter 1

Introduction  
to sustainable  
learning**Intended learning outcomes**

Engagement with the text in this chapter will enable readers to do the following:

- understand the framework of this book and its overall focus on sustainable learning as a way of bringing together inclusive teaching and learning practices in contemporary classrooms
- delineate important concepts associated with special and inclusive education and effective teaching and understand how these are related through sustainable learning
- be familiar with key terms used in this text and understand their derivation
- understand how relevant legislative frameworks apply to educators' responsibilities and education provision to students with disabilities or learning difficulties

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## Sustainable Learning

**Lifelong learning** is the continued development of knowledge and skills throughout life.

**ATRIUM** Active learning; Thinking, Relating to others; Using language, symbols and ICT; and Managing self.

**Active learning** is engagement that begins with curiosity and evolves into self-regulated learning.

**Inclusive practices** remove barriers to learning by considering students' capabilities and taking into account their learning needs.

**Differentiation** is the process of providing all students with access to the appropriate curriculum according to their needs.

### Big ideas

- Sustainable learning is learning for all, teaching that matters and learning that lasts. Its foundation is effective classroom practice, and its goal is to provide for the learning needs of all students throughout their school years and into **lifelong learning**.
- Effective teaching occurs within a series of nested frameworks. Legislative frameworks define teacher responsibilities.
- Teaching for sustainable learning pays attention to students' cultures and their relationships with places, families and communities. Such teaching is responsible, relevant and intentional and focuses on the key capabilities of human performance.
- The key capabilities of human performance can be summarised using the acronym **ATRIUM**, which stands for **Active learning**; Thinking; Relating to others; Using language, symbols and information and communication technology (ICT); and Managing self.

### Introduction

*Sustainable Learning* presents a new way of looking at effective **inclusive practices** for contemporary classrooms. As authors, we bring a blend of classroom, specialist and consultative experience in education and school psychology to the task of exploring in detail what teachers need to know and do to be confident, effective and inclusive. Throughout this text, we focus on practices and strategies important in engaging diverse learners and present these within a coherent framework built on what we consider to be the most important factors in understanding learning and teaching.

Our ultimate goal is to guide appropriate instructional **differentiation** according to students' needs so that at least three conditions are satisfied. First, quality learning experiences should be available to all students. Secondly, to accomplish this, all educators need to focus on acquiring the skills underpinning teaching that matters. (By this we mean teaching that is evidence based, purposeful, relevant and responsive to students' needs.) Thirdly, students must be able to demonstrate that content is mastered and learning maintained to the extent that, as far as possible, they become independent learners throughout their lives. Independent and active learning is fundamental to meeting contemporary challenges; we contend that it is not enough to have only 'taught' content.

Sustainable learning is learning for all, teaching that matters and learning that lasts. Figure 1.1 shows how these key organising ideas are all involved in sustainable learning. Effective, responsive teaching supports learning for everyone – learning that is maintained and lifelong. All three dimensions of sustainable learning are interlinked and unfurl during and after the school years.

## Chapter 1 Introduction to sustainable learning



Figure 1.1: Sustainable learning: learning for all, teaching that matters, learning that lasts

### Learning for all

As it is described in this text, sustainable learning is an approach to inclusive education that aims to secure a fair society into the future by equipping teachers with ways to respond to the increasing complexity and diversity evident in contemporary classrooms and with the skills and resources to be able to teach every student in a way that is 'sustaining, tenable, healthy and durable' (Sterling 2008, 65). The presentation of Māori and Aboriginal models and terminology in pertinent sections of this book, for example, aims to incorporate valuable perspectives relevant to inclusive practice and to respect the cultural and language contexts of learners.

The last 50 years have seen significant progress towards primary education provision for every child on the planet. The UNESCO Education for All initiatives in emerging nations have been grounded in the knowledge that education is a key driver of economic and social progress, particularly the education of girls (Ischinger, cited in Asia Society 2011, 5), which has been identified as one of the best investments a society can make in terms of future social and economic benefits (Boserup, Tan and Toulmin 2013).

There is clear evidence that in the effort to increase equity and enhance educational outcomes globally, enabling young children's participation in pre-primary programs is effective, alongside intensive support programs (for example, in literacy and numeracy) targeting key skill development by learners at risk, parental involvement and close ties between schools and communities. A further vital factor is the development of teachers' capacity and motivation to deliver better instruction to every student in the classroom.

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**Disability** often results from an impairment that may be physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional and/or developmental.

**Integration** is the placement (permanent or non-permanent) of students with disabilities or learning difficulties in mainstream, or regular, educational settings.

**Learning difficulties** are problems with basic academic skills encountered by learners, which often have social and emotional dimensions. In New Zealand, the term 'named learning difficulties' is used to encompass attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder and dyslexia.

**Inclusion** in education is the provision of educational opportunities that meet students' learning needs within their own communities.

In Australia and New Zealand, the provision of education to students with **disabilities** has followed the usual pattern of gradually expanding from basic schooling to the education of students with particular impairments (for example, visual and auditory) and then the establishment of special schools. In the first half of the 20th century, schools for children with specific disabilities were run mostly by charities. By the second half of the century, most regional governments had assumed responsibility for the education provided by special schools and had also moved to establish special educational units in 'regular' schools (Angloinfo 2014). The **integration** of students with disabilities into regular classrooms began in the mid 1970s and increased in the 1990s. This occurred because of concerns about the effectiveness of separate special educational settings and in conjunction with changing societal attitudes which increasingly supported the rights of people with disabilities to be educated in their neighbourhood schools and to contribute fully to their communities (Konza 2008).

The impact of the principle of 'normalisation' also contributed to the rise of integration in schools and the participation of people with disabilities in their communities (Bank-Mikkelson 1969; Nirje 1970). The term 'normalisation', coined by Wolfensberger (1970), underscored the right of all individuals to be valued and to participate meaningfully in their communities, including attending local schools. Konza (2008) characterised integration (or mainstreaming) as the schooling of most students with disabilities in regular classrooms for part or all of the school day. Integration, as an educational policy, still includes the provision of separate specialised settings as an option for students with severe disabilities.

The period from the 1970s to the 1990s saw more and more students with disabilities or **learning difficulties** educated in their neighbourhood schools, but because of a lack of resources, the provision of appropriate access and materials (such as ramps, modified toilets, audio loops and large print or Braille texts) was not always widespread. This meant that many students were still not able to attend their local schools.

Since the mid 1990s, however, the **inclusion** philosophy has been influential in changing education provision for students with disabilities or learning difficulties. Inclusion is about more than the location of education; it requires the provision of an educational system that can meet the needs of all learners and include their families as part of local school communities. It involves restructuring educational systems so that schools have responsibility for providing the facilities, resources and access to an appropriate curriculum suited to all students irrespective of their learning needs (Konza 2008). It is a social

**Chapter 1** Introduction to sustainable learning**Reflection 1.1: Defining inclusion**

Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) suggest that it is useful to distinguish between ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ definitions of inclusion. Using their framework, narrow definitions of inclusion aim for the promotion of inclusion for a specific student group – mainly, students who have disabilities or learning difficulties – in regular educational settings. In contrast, broad definitions of inclusion focus not on specific student groups but on diversity itself and how schools respond to the differentness of all students and all members of the school community.

The use of the term ‘inclusion’ has already broadened from that of the 1990s, and this is likely to continue. Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2011, 32) note an important tension when they observe that both broad and narrow definitions of inclusion become ‘fragmented’ when they break down the groups that are to be included. For example, they cite a policy report from the United Kingdom that describes ‘an educationally inclusive school as one in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and wellbeing of every young person matter’ (Ofsted 2000, 4). In the same report, however, Ofsted (2000, 4) notes that the following main student groups are ‘identified in relation to inclusion: “girls and boys; minority ethnic and faith groups; travellers, asylum seekers and refugees; pupils who need support to learn English as an additional language; students with special educational needs; gifted and talented students; children ‘looked after’ by the local authority; other children such as sick children; young carers; those children from families under stress; pregnant school girls and teenage mothers; and any other students who are at risk of disaffection and exclusion”’. This list divides the notion of ‘every young person’ into numerous groups. While such an approach may help identify commonalities and allocate resources, it also means that, as Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010, 30) note, ‘inclusion becomes a process of “managing” many different individuals and groups who are perceived as “problems”’. Inclusion, at its root, implies including people in settings where they were not previously; otherwise, they would have already belonged.

justice philosophy grounded in United Nations frameworks (for example, CSIE 2013; OHCHR 1989; United Nations Enable 1993).

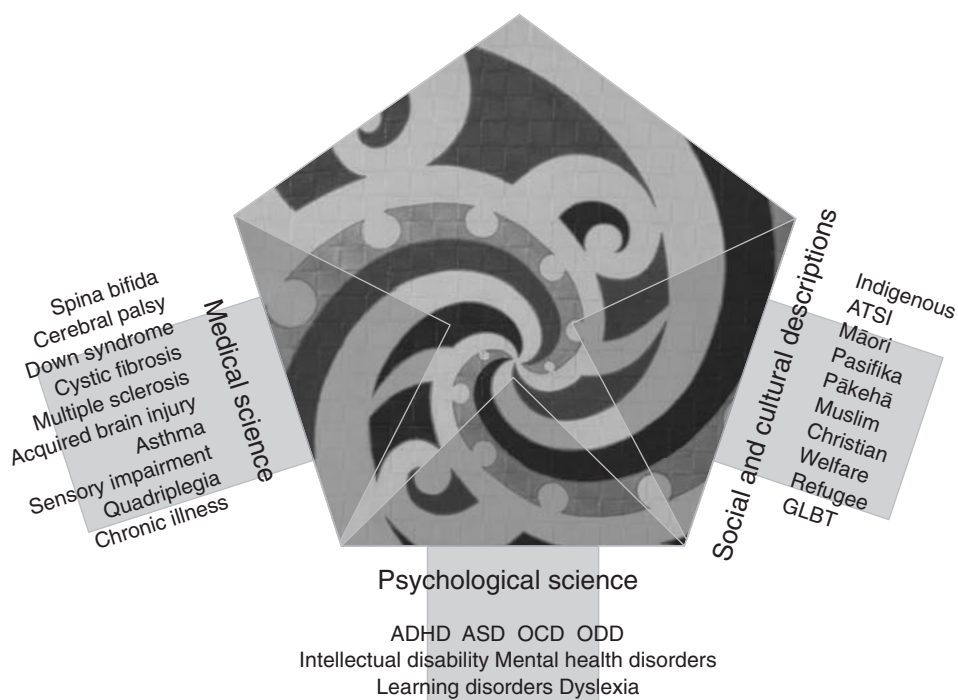
As shown in the list of identifiers in reflection 1.1, many labels for disabilities, types of learning difficulties and social and cultural variations are currently used in education. These labels are derived from three main sources: medical science, psychological science and sociocultural contexts. (Some examples are shown in figure 1.2 grouped around a Māori representation of human growth and learning.) We are proposing a different way of thinking about learners, which will better support sustainable learning and reframe teaching. We see every learner in terms of capabilities rather than deficits or disabilities and in this way seek to avoid limitations that may be inherent in the interpretation of labels. The ATRiUM capabilities framework (introduced later in this chapter) provides a way to think about the learning needs of all learners. A focus on individual students’ learning needs is obviously important to implementing inclusion and in this book means providing what is necessary for students to learn and to achieve: it requires removing all possible barriers to learning for

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[More information](#)**Sustainable Learning****Figure 1.2:** *Examples of labels and their sources*

all. It is vital to remember that responding to individual student needs may require extra learning support or extending and enriching individuals' school experiences. Such education provisions may necessitate students moving around the school and community and in and out of class to access what they need.

In this book, therefore, we will be focusing on the capabilities of learners and teachers. However, we will refer to disabilities and learning difficulties when necessary, because these terms help us share meaning and are fundamental to accessing much of the available information. Students experiencing disabilities that are usually readily identifiable (physical, cognitive, visual, auditory, learning, behavioural, communicatory, social and emotional disabilities) generally require some kind of learning or behavioural support so they can access the curriculum and participate in educational settings. Similarly, 'learning difficulties' is a term used broadly in Australia and New Zealand to refer to those students who experience academic and school-related problems, and at least 20 per cent of school students are considered to have such problems at some time during their schooling (Ashman and Elkins 2009). There is no assumption that students experiencing learning difficulties have an underlying impairment, although some of them certainly may. Students with learning difficulties tend to be a diverse group. Difficulty with academic subjects can be experienced for myriad reasons.

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In New Zealand, the term ‘named learning difficulties’ usually refers to the subset of students with learning difficulties who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder or dyslexia. It is important to acknowledge both individuals who have a named learning difficulty and those who do not. There are many learners without labels who experience as much difficulty in learning as those with diagnosed learning difficulties. Responsive teaching is charged with exploring and addressing the learning needs of all learners.

Our concern is to not objectify people because of the disabilities and adverse conditions they may experience. Language use, in such instances, can frame the valuing of people and can shape understanding about teaching and learning and about the learning needs of students. We know, however, that language is representative of culture and attitudes and that it is highly significant in the context of inclusive education. Language has had to change from that used when learners who had disabilities or learning difficulties were not able to access education at all. It has altered in tandem with changes in society’s view of difference and service provision for people who have needs that are in any way atypical.

### Think and do 1.1: Describing people

In the past, disability was seen as being wholly within individuals: they ‘had’ the disability and were largely defined by it. Such an approach is in contrast to the social model of disability, which defines disability as a mismatch between the environment and the person and guides us to put people first in our language.

In August 2012, Radio New Zealand reporters interviewed people with disabilities about how they were described. The most disliked terms were ‘handicapped’ and ‘special needs’. ‘The disabled’ was also a term many disliked, as it ignored the fact that they were people first. Interviewees suggested asking what terminology each person preferred, as it relates to their individual identity. In New Zealand, advocates have tended to use the term ‘disabled people’, as it reflects the social thinking model of the 2001 New Zealand Disability Strategy that people are disabled by society (Minister for Disability Issues 2001). In ‘people first’ language, that becomes ‘people with disability’. Since the 2006 United Nations Convention of Persons with Disabilities, ‘people with disabilities’ has become a more commonly used term (Workbridge 2010). Stella Young (2012) from the ABC’s *The Drum* makes two potent points on this issue:

I am repeatedly asked in interviews exactly ‘what’s wrong’ with me and I always give them the same answer; I don’t identify the name of my condition in an interview unless it’s relevant to the context of the story. The fact that I’m a wheelchair user is relevant to a story about access to public transport. The long-winded medical term for my impairment is not...

Now, I find the concept of having to clarify my status as a person extraordinarily condescending. No one else is ever asked to qualify their status as a person. Gay men and women are not ‘people with homosexuality’. Women are not ‘people who are female’. Footballers are not ‘people who play football’. I’ve met a lot of disabled people in my time, and not once have I ever met someone whose impairment is so profound that their status as a person is in doubt.

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Think about how you use language to describe people, particularly people who have disabilities or learning difficulties. Check out media descriptions. Are they written with respect and consideration or with sensationalism? Share what you notice.

In Australia, the most important pieces of legislation that underpin the inclusive education of students in their local schools are the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Disability Standards for Education 2005. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, the definition of disability ‘includes physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological, and learning disabilities, as well as physical disfigurements, and the presence of disease-causing organisms in the body. The definition includes past, present and future disabilities as well as imputed disabilities and covers behaviour that is a symptom or manifestation of the disability’ (Department of Education 2010, 5).

The Disability Standards for Education aim to provide clarity about the rights of students by specifying how all educational and training services should be accessible to students with disabilities. The standards also define the meaning of the following important terms:

*On the same basis:* On the same basis means that a student with disability must have opportunities and choices, which are comparable with those offered to students without disability. This applies to: admission or enrolment in an institution; participation in courses or programs; and use of facilities and services.

*Consultation:* When deciding what to include in an educational course and how to teach it, an education provider should consult with each student with disability doing the course, or an associate of the student, about the effect of the disability on their ability to seek enrolment, and any reasonable **adjustments** necessary. Where possible the student, or their associate, and the education provider should work together to find adjustments and solutions to help the student access and participate in education and training.

*Reasonable adjustment:* Under the Standards, education providers have a positive obligation to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of a student with disability.

When assessing whether an adjustment is reasonable, the education provider is required to consider the interests of all parties affected, including the student with disability, the education provider, staff and other students. The education provider is required to consult with the student or their carer to identify and make an adjustment appropriate to the student’s disability.

*Unjustifiable hardship:* The Standards do not require changes to be made if this would impose unjustifiable hardship on the education provider. All relevant circumstances are to be taken into account when assessing unjustifiable hardship including:

- benefit or detriment to any persons concerned
- disability of the person
- financial circumstances of the education provider (Department of Education 2010, 11)

All state and territory educational policies claim a philosophical acceptance of inclusion and support it where possible and when in the best interests of the



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child. The use of reasonable adjustments is fundamental to inclusive practice (Konza 2008).

In New Zealand, the *New Zealand Disability Strategy: making a world of difference, whakanui oranga* aims to create a more inclusive society that enhances full participation for all both in education and in post-school life (Minister for Disability Issues 2001). The strategy has educational aims to ensure that schools are responsive, accountable and inclusive and that teachers understand learning needs and have adequate resources and lifelong opportunities for learning. *Ka hikitia – managing for success: the Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012* sets the direction for Māori learners, including those with disabilities or learning difficulties, by advocating high-quality, culturally responsive education (Ministry of Education 2008). The New Zealand Ministry of Education is bound by legislation in the Education Act 1989, the Human Rights Act 1993 and the Building Act 2004 that supports education provision for students with special educational needs. All of this has implications for how schools need to act in the interests of students who have disabilities.

In 2013, educational priorities identified by the New Zealand Ministry of Education focused on improving learning for students who had not been doing as well as they could, including students with disabilities, learning difficulties or named learning difficulties. (For more on this, see Ministry of Education 2013.) These priorities build on the evaluation of the successful inclusion of students with high support needs, which concluded that ‘approximately half of the 229 schools reviewed demonstrated mostly inclusive practice’, with 30 per cent exhibiting some inclusive practices and 20 per cent few inclusive practices. This statistic underlines the reason for this book’s emphasis on responsive teaching that will improve outcomes in learning for all students. The most successful inclusive settings employed three key principles:

- having ethical standards and leadership that built the culture of an inclusive school
- having well-organised systems, effective teamwork and constructive relationships that identified and supported the inclusion of students with high needs
- using innovative and flexible practices that managed the complex and unique challenges related to including students with high needs. (Education Review Office 2010, 1)

### Teaching that matters

Learning that is mastered and maintained, fostered by good teaching and available to all *matters*. A message delivered throughout this text is that inclusion is facilitated by effective instruction, quality teachers with high expectations and the support of families; when learning is at the centre of everything that goes on in the classroom, teachers and students sustain each other’s learning.

The teacher is the key to effecting sustainable learning in the school and classroom. Sustainable learning depends on effective teaching, which responds

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to individual learning needs in the best possible ways. By providing teaching that matters, responsive teachers help all learners develop the skills they need to meet their goals and to regulate their own learning. Responsive teaching practices ensure a match between students' learning needs and the learning opportunities provided and are characterised by the use of flexible, differentiated activities underpinned by carefully thought out assessment procedures. Responsive teaching sees learners in terms of their capabilities and works towards further developing and strengthening them. It builds on the prior learning and the cultural capital of each learner. It is teaching that is effective in motivating learning and in engaging with the worlds of the learners. Responsive teaching is characterised by a series of cycles of planning, activity and reflection, within which important teaching decisions are made. The responsive teaching framework (RTF), introduced in chapter 3 and revisited in subsequent chapters, is an important guide to teaching that matters. Responsive teachers are flexible and adaptable in order to meet the changing needs of all learners in their classes. The RTF meets the four descriptors set out by Sterling (2008, 65):

- *Sustaining*: it helps sustain people, communities and ecosystems;
- *Tenable*: it is ethically defensible, working with integrity, justice, respect and inclusiveness;
- *Healthy*: it is itself a viable system, embodying and nurturing healthy relationships and emergence at different system levels;
- *Durable*: it works well enough in practice to be able to keep doing it.

Specifically, in terms of learning that is sustainable and teaching that is effective, Van den Branden (2012) summarises the findings of research that has successfully improved the academic achievement of at-risk students with and without disabilities from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds (for example, Finn and Rock 1997; Garcia and Kleifgen 2010; Hattie 2009; Marzano 2003; Muijs et al. 2004). He found that the following teacher behaviours and school and classroom factors make a difference that lasts:

- (1) Students at risk should be presented challenging and interesting content, with teachers having high expectations of the students' learning potential and stimulating students' higher order thinking skills (from primary school onwards); crucially, the latter should not be put 'on hold'.
- (2) Time available should be maximally devoted to academic content and the teaching of key competencies.
- (3) The school should provide for a safe and secure environment for learning, characterized by a good disciplinary climate, warm and positive student–teacher relations, strong investment in students' well-being, self-confidence, and intrinsic learning motivation.
- (4) New content should be related to individual students' prior knowledge and experiences; students' existing knowledge and skills (including the students' mother tongue skills) should be tapped as rich resources for new learning.
- (5) Meaningful, situated, holistic learning in context should be complemented with explicit skills instruction. Overall, the teacher should display a wide array of methodologies and formats to cater