Steps to Becoming an Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment

Description of tool:
This tool suggests steps that school staff (or a dedicated team) might take to create a more "inclusive, learning-friendly environment" at their school. It includes definitions for the terms "inclusive" and "learning-friendly" as proposed in the source document, and a simple activity for identifying and finding ways to overcome potential resistance to change.

The information in this tool was adapted by UNESCO from the following publication:

UNESCO, 2003. Embracing Diversity: **Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments**. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO.
http://www.unescobkk.org/ips/ebooks/documents/Embracing_Diversity/index.htm

Description of document:
This Toolkit provides ideas and activities to help teacher trainers, teachers at all levels (in both formal and non-formal education settings), administrators, students, family and community members improve access to schools and learning for children who usually do not go to school, such as those with diverse backgrounds and abilities. It defines what an "inclusive, learning-friendly environment" is, identifies barriers that makes schools exclusive rather than inclusive and offers practical solutions to the challenges of managing diversity so that ALL children, school staff and family members feel welcome and appreciated at school and ALL students receive a quality education in a "child-friendly" school environment.
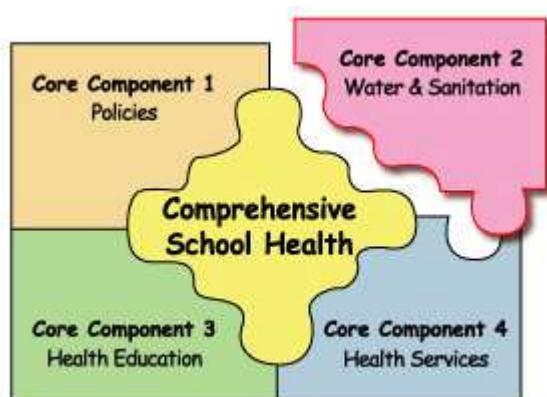
This information or activity supports Core Component #2 of the FRESH framework for effective school health: **water, sanitation & the environment.** It will have a greater impact if it is reinforced by activities in the other three components of the framework.

Steps to Becoming an Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment[1]

Introduction

ALL children have the right to learn, as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which virtually all governments in the world have signed. Moreover, all children **can** learn, without regard to their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This includes disabled and gifted children; street and working children; children of remote or nomadic populations; children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities; children affected by HIV/AIDS; and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

These two principles—that all children are both entitled to education, and able to learn—are cornerstones of the movement to make educational systems and schools more inclusive and more learning-friendly. Also fundamental to the concept of inclusive education is the idea that **"all children are different"** and that they all benefit, as do teachers, parents and the whole community, when educational systems go beyond merely "accepting" individual differences to respecting and embracing diversity by ensuring that every child has the opportunity not only to be enrolled in an "ordinary" school, but also to learn to his or her fullest potential while there. This is what it means to create an inclusive, learning-friendly environment (ILFE).

What is "Inclusive"?

Over the years, the term "inclusive" has come to mean "including children with disabilities" in "regular" classrooms for children without disabilities. Here, "inclusive" means **much more.**

"Inclusive" does mean including children with disabilities, such as children who have difficulties seeing or hearing, who cannot walk, or who are slower to learn. But "inclusive" also means including **ALL** children who are left out or excluded from school. This means, for example, children who don't speak the language of the classroom or who belong to a different religion or caste, and children who may be at risk of dropping out because they are sick, hungry, or not achieving well. It also means girls who are pregnant, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and all girls and boys who should be in school but are not, especially those who work at home, in the fields, or elsewhere (migrants) to help their families survive. **"**Inclusive" means seeking all available support—from school authorities, the community, families, children, educational institutions, health services, community leaders, and so on—for finding and teaching **ALL** children.

Even when all children are **enrolled in school**, some may still be excluded from **participating and learning in the classroom**. For instance, they may be children:

- for whom a lesson or textbook is not written in their first language;
- who are never asked to contribute;
- who never offer to contribute;
- who can't see the blackboard or a textbook or can't hear the teacher; or
- who are not learning well and for whom no attempt is made to help them.

These children are likely to be sitting at the back of the classroom and may soon leave altogether (drop out). As teachers, we are responsible for creating a learning environment where **ALL** children can learn, **ALL** children want to learn, and **ALL** children feel included in our classrooms and schools.

What is "Learning-Friendly"?

Over the last ten years, many schools have worked to become "child-friendly." A "child-friendly" school is one in which children have the right to learn to their fullest potential within a safe and welcoming environment. The aim is to improve each child's participation and learning in school, rather than concentrating on the subject matter and examinations. Being "child-friendly" is very important, but it is not complete.

Children come to school to learn, but as teachers, we are always learning, too. We learn new things about the world to teach our students. We learn to teach more effectively—and enjoyably—so that all students learn how to read or do mathematics, and we learn new things from our students as well.

A "learning-friendly" environment is "child-friendly" **and** "teacher-friendly." It stresses the importance of students and teachers learning together as a learning community. It places children at the centre of learning and encourages their active participation in learning. It also fulfils our needs and interests as teachers, so that we want to, and are capable of, giving children the best education possible.

Some teachers fear that including children with diverse backgrounds and abilities in their classes will mean more work, but it need not be so. In inclusive classrooms, teachers can successfully manage even wide differences among the students by recognizing their students' strengths and weaknesses and planning lessons accordingly, using teaching strategies and adapting the curriculum to fit a range of abilities and backgrounds, and, most importantly, mobilizing colleagues, parents, community members and other professionals to help them provide a good quality education for all children.

School administrators can support teachers to work in this way by providing opportunities for teachers to learn new teaching philosophies and methods, encouraging more experienced teachers to partner and mentor less experienced teachers, and recognizing and celebrating teachers' accomplishments. In addition, they should lead efforts to maximize community support in the form of volunteers, financial or in-kind donations, and assistance from outside experts in the fields of special education, disability, health, counseling, etc.

Creating an inclusive, learning-friendly school environment is a process—a journey! There are no set paths or ready-made "quick fix" solutions to follow. Below are suggestions for steps to plan and implement an ILFE.[i] These steps need not be sequential, and can be seen rather as elements that will help your classroom and school to become an ILFE. You can work towards developing these steps according to what you see as appropriate in terms of your time and situation. Moreover, there are undoubtedly other ways of achieving each of the steps than what is proposed here, and you will likely discover some of them on your own. The important thing is to have a positive attitude towards change and a firm commitment to creating an Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environment.

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[i]   These steps were adapted from The All Children Belong Project,
www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/decision_making/planning_steps.html, and from Booth T, Ainscow M, et al. (2000) Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools (Bristol, CSIE).

Step 1: Set Up an ILFE Team

A. Identify the people who will play a role in planning and implementing an ILFE and set up a coordinating group.
These people will make up the ILFE team. Your team might include a few teachers, the head teacher and two or three parents, or it could be larger. It could also include other school staff members, community educators and health care providers, people from marginalized groups, persons with disabilities, older students, community members and representatives of various local organizations.

Step 2: Identify Needs

A. What do people already know and what do they need to learn?

1. **Explore the knowledge of the coordinating group.** What do the ILFE team members already know about the characteristics and benefits of an ILFE? What do you and they need to learn and how will everyone learn it (for instance, by inviting guest speakers, interviewing resource persons and visiting resource centres)?

2. **Explore the knowledge of students, staff, parents, caregivers, and members of the local community.** Once the coordinating group is knowledgeable about an ILFE, decide what questions to ask others. This may involve simple individual interviews or group conversations, or you may design a short questionnaire.

B. Learn about the school and the community's children.

1. **Develop and implement a self-assessment mechanism for getting input from teachers and other school staff about how inclusive and learning friendly the school is currently.** (For a sample self-assessment checklist, see Is Our School Already an Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment? or the source document.) Make a list of what your school is doing already and what needs to be done to become an ILFE.

2. **Find out which children in the community are not coming to school**. One way of doing this, which is described in the source document, is to create a "school-community" map. Like traditional maps, these maps show major community landmarks, but in addition, they also show each household in the community, the number of children in each household and how old they are, and whether (or not) the children identified are attending school. School-community mapping is a great project for school staff, parents, and community members to work on together, or it can also be conducted as a child-to-child activity. Other ways to get information about who is and isn't coming to school include carrying out a household survey, or comparing census data to school enrolment/attendance records.

3. **Identify the educational needs of your students, AND those of traditionally excluded children in your community.** Team members need to understand these needs as completely as possible in order to make good plans for including these children. The team may need to complete an evaluation of students' learning needs if one has not been completed already. Parents can usually give the team a considerable amount of helpful information about their children.

4. **Identify existing resources in your school and community.** List all supports and services required for children with various backgrounds and abilities. These may include government services, NGOs, health clinics, and private agencies.

5. **Describe the current education programme and the school environment.** This description should clarify what facilities, furniture, and materials currently are available and in use. Are these accessible by ALL children? If not, how can they be made more accessible?

6. **Identify and describe teaching and learning processes in classrooms.** Visit classrooms and describe exactly what you see teachers and students doing. Are the classrooms inclusive and learning-friendly? Why or why not?

C. **Analyse this information.**   Describe the changes that need to be made to make classrooms inclusive and learning-friendly. Consider class size, instructional strategies, teaching styles, teacher-student relationships, classroom assistants, and materials used.

D. **Collect further information.**   The information you have gathered may raise new or additional questions. Gather additional information so that you can make your decisions based on all the relevant information, rather than on opinions or ideas.

Step 3: Create a Vision

A. **Describe your desired classroom environment, or even your "Dream (Ideal) Classroom."**
When you and your children walk inside the classroom, what will it look like? What kind of furniture will it have? What will the teacher be doing? What will the students be doing? What will be on the walls? Consider girls and boys; those who do not speak the dominant language; those who have visual, hearing, or intellectual impairments; children of different religious or caste backgrounds—*ALL* children. If all school-age children in the community are in school, what will their different learning needs be and how will these be met? Write down as specifically as you can your "vision" of your "dream classroom," which will serve as your goal in creating an ILFE.

B. **Next, describe your desired education programme and school environment.**
Consider the resources described above. What kind of support do you most need from the community, from local government, from education officials? How can you get this support? Who can help you to raise this support? How can children become involved? Write down these actions. They will help you to realize your "vision."

Step 4: Produce an ILFE School Development Plan

A. **Develop a schedule of activities for creating and implementing your ILFE.**
You will need to describe in detail the changes that will be needed, and when they will be implemented. You should also list materials and services, people responsible for providing these services, and any other resources needed. Your schedule should include realistic dates for implementing changes. It should have solid targets but also be flexible enough to meet changing needs and conditions.

B. Provide for additional resources as needed.

Prepare in advance to add needed resources (such as budgeting for an instructional aide, developing a peer tutoring system, or establishing a special parent-teacher committee for resource development).

C. Consider minds and hearts.

Developing education so that it encourages the learning and participation of all learners takes place in two ways: through detailed analysis and planning, and through changes in people's hearts and minds. The analysis and planning can be accomplished by following the suggestions provided above. But what will you do to bring about change in people's hearts and minds? For instance, how about starting by increasing the participation of parents and community members in your classroom, so that they learn for themselves about the benefits of an ILFE and can help you more in your teaching and the children's learning. Booklet 2 of the source document, on "Working with Families and Communities to Create an ILFE" contains other ideas you might try.

Step 5: Implement Your Plan

A. Provide technical assistance for staff as needed.

Is technical assistance needed such as the need for workshops on special topics that are given by experienced persons? If so, what type of assistance is needed and who will provide it? How it will be implemented, and how often will it be provided?

B. Train school staff (teaching and non-teaching) and students as needed.

Training topics can cover children's rights and their implications for education, gender inequality and gender equity, cultural and linguistic differences and similarities, disability awareness, specialized care instruction, clarification of personnel responsibilities, cooperative teaching strategies, etc.

C. Promote active parental involvement.

The planning team should develop a system for parent/teacher communication. Who will be responsible for regularly communicating with parents? Parental input should be encouraged and seriously considered throughout the planning and implementation process.

D. Plan how you will deal with resistance.

At M School, the Principal allowed teachers to change at the pace with which they were comfortable. Most teachers quickly adopted learner-centred teaching, but some did not. Most parents supported the school's decision to become more inclusive, but some were concerned about how many children with disabilities would be admitted. They didn't want the school to be seen as a "school for children with disabilities or special needs" only. The school solved this problem by setting a specific percentage for the enrolment of special needs students. Use the activity in Annex 1 (Challenges to Becoming an ILFE) to identify the resistance you may face and ways to overcome it.

Step 6: Evaluate Your Plan and Celebrate Your Success

A. Monitor progress and modify your plan as needed.

The ILFE team is an ongoing resource to be used throughout the school year. Prepare a schedule of follow-up meetings. Decide how monitoring will be done and who will do it. Observe how the existing programme is going; decide if existing supports are adequate or need to be improved or eliminated.

B. Celebrate Your Successes!

Achieving significant changes in an education programme—especially one that has included an investment of human and material resources—deserves to be celebrated! Since hopefully you have involved the community every step of the way, invite the community to celebrate the changes in your school by holding a fair, a festival, or an "Open School Day." In an Open School Day, parents, community members, and even officials are invited to the school. Representative work from ALL children is displayed along with new teaching materials; teachers demonstrate their new skills of assessment and teaching; and children of all abilities demonstrate what they have learned.

Monitoring Your Progress

What differences are we making? Are our classrooms and schools becoming more inclusive and learning-friendly? To find out whether you are successfully developing an Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environment, you will want to ask two key questions:

1. Are we "inclusive and learning-friendly" in the ways we set out to be? (How can we improve on what we have done?)

2. What difference have we made, especially in improving children's learning?

You can evaluate the process (#1) and the outcomes (#2) of an ILFE both informally and formally. You and others inside the school can conduct informal evaluations, and then use the information you collect to shape or make changes in the programme. In addition to informal evaluation, it is wise to have trusted outsiders come in on a regular basis to conduct a formal evaluation. This evaluation may be part of a school accreditation visit, or simply a way to view the school through "fresh eyes." At "M" School during their annual Open School Day, parents fill out questionnaires to evaluate the school's facilities, performance, and the children's learning, as well as to recommend any improvements. The school gets many good ideas this way. *And remember—children are also good monitors and evaluators, so ask them too!*

The self-assessment checklist you developed in Step 2 can be used as a monitoring tool so that you can follow your school's progress towards becoming an ILFE over time. In addition, here are five ways to gather information in order to find out whether the school is moving towards becoming an ILFE.

1. **Keep diaries and records.** Teachers can keep a short diary each month of what they have achieved in developing an inclusive, learning-friendly environment. This will include keeping records of activities, and of meetings in the school and the community. Class monitors or other pupils can also keep a simple diary of what has taken place and can discuss it with the teachers and the whole school each month. Community leaders or parents can be asked to visit regularly and keep records, too.

2. **Talk to other people.** Much of this activity is done informally as your ILFE programme develops, but sometimes you need to plan special occasions when you look for answers. You can do this by preparing a list of questions and recording the answers you get to them. Talk to pupils, parents, and other teachers, either individually or in groups. Try to develop questions that seek information and bring out opinions, rather than answers that the people think **you** want to hear.

3. **Assess knowledge and skills through essays.** What do you and other teachers know about the diverse population of students in the school? Teachers and/or students could be asked to write essays about what they know and what they think they still need to know about the diverse abilities and needs of the student population.

4. **Observation.** Whom and what do we observe? Head teachers need to observe teachers' instruction in classrooms as part of overall professional development. (Keep records of how often the head teacher visits the classroom and what the discussion is about.) Peer observation is also useful, particularly as part of team teaching. Teachers from one class can observe pupils from other classes. Keep records of these observations and comments. They can be discussed periodically in groups consisting of the head teacher and teachers.

    Look at the buildings and the surroundings. Have your ILFE activities made an impact on the appearance of the school? Is it "barrier free"? Are the girls' and boys' toilets in different areas? Do girls and boys of all abilities have equal access to the playing fields?

    Observe changes in the way pupils act and behave. Do they help each other in ways they did not before?

5. **Documents.** Examine various school documents, such as newsletters, letters to parents, progress reports, lesson plans and curriculum syllabi. Do the written documents from your school that go out to parents and the community reflect the inclusive learning environment you are trying to become? Do teachers' lesson plans and the curriculum syllabi reflect the Inclusive, Learning-Friendly environment of your school?

Annex 1: Challenges to Becoming an Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environment

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An Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environment at school benefits not only children, but teachers, parents and the whole community. For example:

Children:

- become more self-confident and develop greater self-esteem;
- take pride in themselves and their achievements, and learn how to learn independently both inside and outside of school;
- learn to apply what they learn in school to their everyday lives, such as in their play and in their home;
- learn to enjoy being with others who are different from themselves, including how to be sensitive to and adapt to these differences;
- become more creative, and this improves how well they learn;
- learn to value their native language, to appreciate their cultural traditions, and to consider themselves as also being different from others and thus "special" ;
- improve their communication skills and are better prepared for life;
- gain—or regain—self-respect for themselves as they learn to respect others.

Teachers:

- receive more training and gain new knowledge, for example, of the different ways children learn and can be taught;
- have greater opportunities to explore new ideas and learn new techniques by communicating more frequently with others from within and outside their school, such as in school clusters or other school or teacher networks;
- are more likely to have people assisting them (paid staff or volunteers) in the classroom;
- in seeking to overcome challenges, develop more positive attitudes and approaches towards people, children, and situations;
- by applying new strategies and methods, find they can encourage their students to be more interested, more creative, and more attentive;
- receive more positive feedback from children, parents, colleagues, supervisors, community members, etc.
- experience greater job satisfaction and a higher sense of accomplishment when ALL children are succeeding, to the best of their abilities, in school.

Parents:

- learn more about how their children are being educated;
- become personally involved in their children's learning and feel a greater sense of importance about helping their children to learn;
- feel respected and valued by teachers, and welcome at the school;
- learn how to deal more effectively with their children at home by using techniques that the teachers use in school;
- learn to interact with others in the community, and to understand and help solve each other's problems;
- feel pride that their children—and ALL children—are receiving a quality education.

Members of the community:

- discover that more "community leaders of the future" are being prepared to participate actively in society;
- see that social problems, such as petty crimes or adolescent problems, may be reduced;
- become more involved in the school, creating better relations between the school and the community;
- develop a sense of pride as more children go to school and learn.

With all these benefits…
why don't ALL schools have Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments?

Below is a short list of some of the obstacles (barriers) to becoming an IFLE that may affect some schools. For each obstacle, identify some ways to overcome it within your school.

1. Change takes energy, openness, and willingness. If teachers have many domestic responsibilities or many non-teaching administrative duties at school, such as attending frequent meetings, they may feel that they don't have the time or the energy to change.

   Ways to Overcome this Obstacle:

   a. _____

   _____

   b. _____

   _____

   c. _____

   _____

   d. _____

   _____

2. Teachers do not understand what an ILFE is, or think they do not have the resources that are needed to become an ILFE.

   Ways to Overcome this Obstacle:

   a. _____

   _____

   b. _____

   _____

   c. _____

   _____

   d. _____

   _____

3. Parents and even teachers may not understand the benefits of an ILFE and are concerned that including all kinds of children in the school will affect their children negatively.

    Ways to Overcome this Obstacle:

    a. _____

        _____

    b. _____

        _____

    c. _____

        _____

    d. _____

        _____

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[1] Adapted from: UNESCO, 2003. *Embracing Diversity:* **Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments**. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO.