

From Policy to Practice:

Understanding Inclusion in Ontario Classrooms



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Before We Begin

I want to start by acknowledging that you are here.

If you have opened this resource, there is something in you that is reflecting, questioning, or looking for a different way of understanding inclusion in your classroom.

That matters.

Inclusion is not always clear, and it is not always easy. Many educators are asked to navigate complex expectations, shifting policies, and diverse learner needs, all at the same time. It is okay if you do not have all the answers.

As you move through this resource, be kind to yourself. Take what resonates, question what does not, and allow space for reflection and growth.

Inclusion is not something you perfect, it is something you continue to learn, practice, and evolve over time.

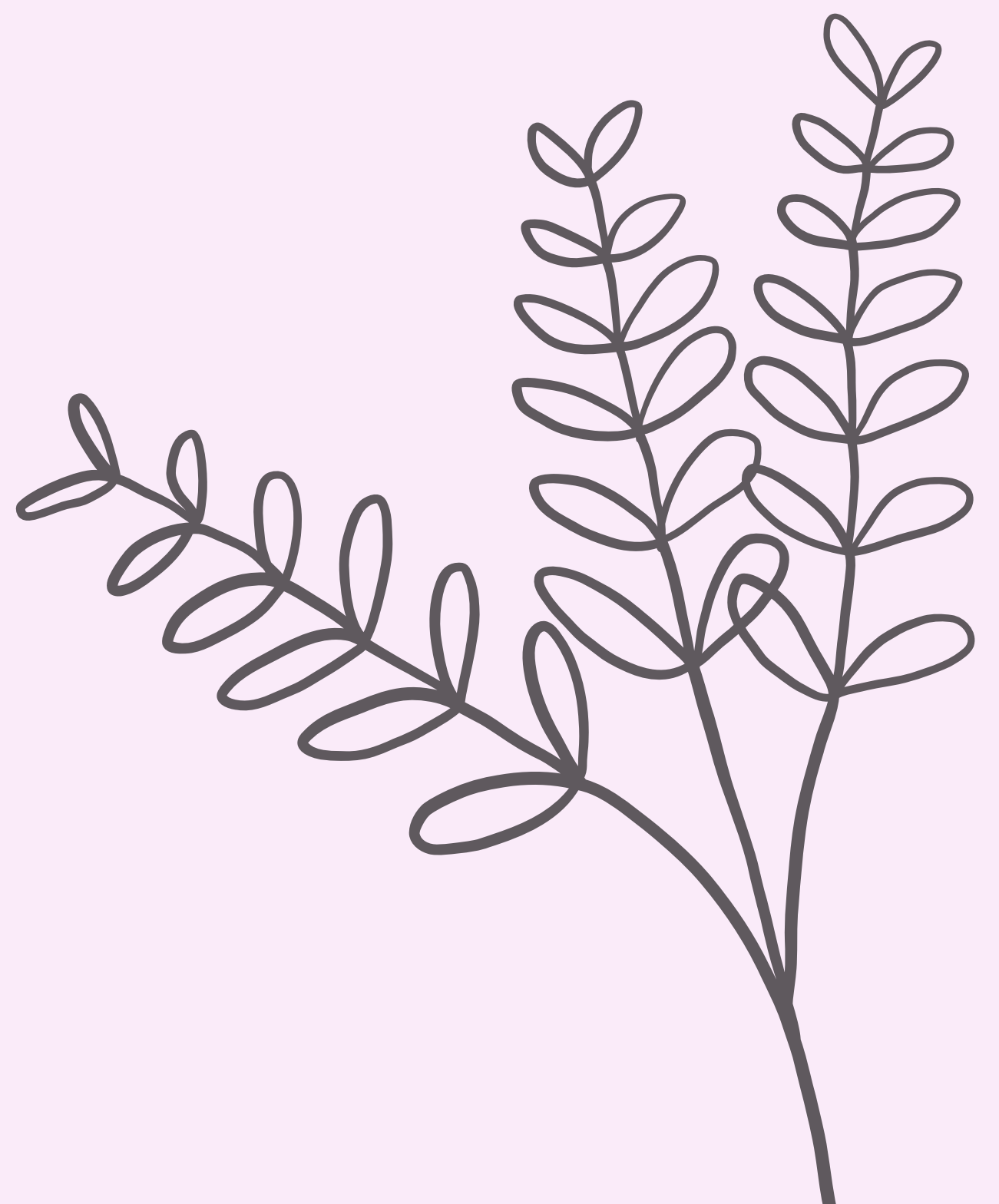


What this Toolkit is About

This toolkit was created to help educators better understand how inclusion is described in Ontario Ministry of Education policy documents for Kindergarten to Grade 3.

While inclusion is widely valued in education, policy documents do not provide one clear definition. Instead, inclusion is described through different expectations, processes, and principles (Massouti, 2023).

This toolkit breaks down key findings from the research and translates them into clear, practical ideas that can support inclusive classroom practice.



The Problem

Inclusion is a central goal in education but it is not always clearly defined in policy.

Instead of one shared definition, inclusion is described in different ways across documents. This can lead to:

- Different interpretations among educators
- A focus on procedures rather than student experience
- Inconsistency in how inclusion is implemented in classrooms

Research shows that unclear policy language can result in varied understandings of inclusion across educational contexts (MacCormack et al., 2021).





Early Identification & Intervention

What policy emphasizes:

- Identifying student needs early
- Ongoing monitoring of development and learning
- Timely intervention and support

What this can look like in practice:

- Using observation and documentation to understand each child
- Recognizing strengths alongside needs
- Supporting development without labeling or limiting students

Research in early childhood contexts highlights the importance of understanding diverse learner needs without reducing students to categories or labels (Hogan et al., 2026).



Inclusion begins with understanding the whole child, not just identifying challenges.

Assessment & Accountability



What policy emphasizes:

- Ongoing assessment and evaluation
- Documentation of student progress
- Accountability for student outcomes

What this can look like in practice:

- Using assessment to inform teaching, not just report progress
- Focusing on growth rather than deficits
- Avoiding a “checklist” approach to inclusion

Research suggests that accountability structures can shape how educators prioritize measurable outcomes over more relational aspects of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006).



Assessment should support inclusion, not replace meaningful engagement with students.

Individualized Supports



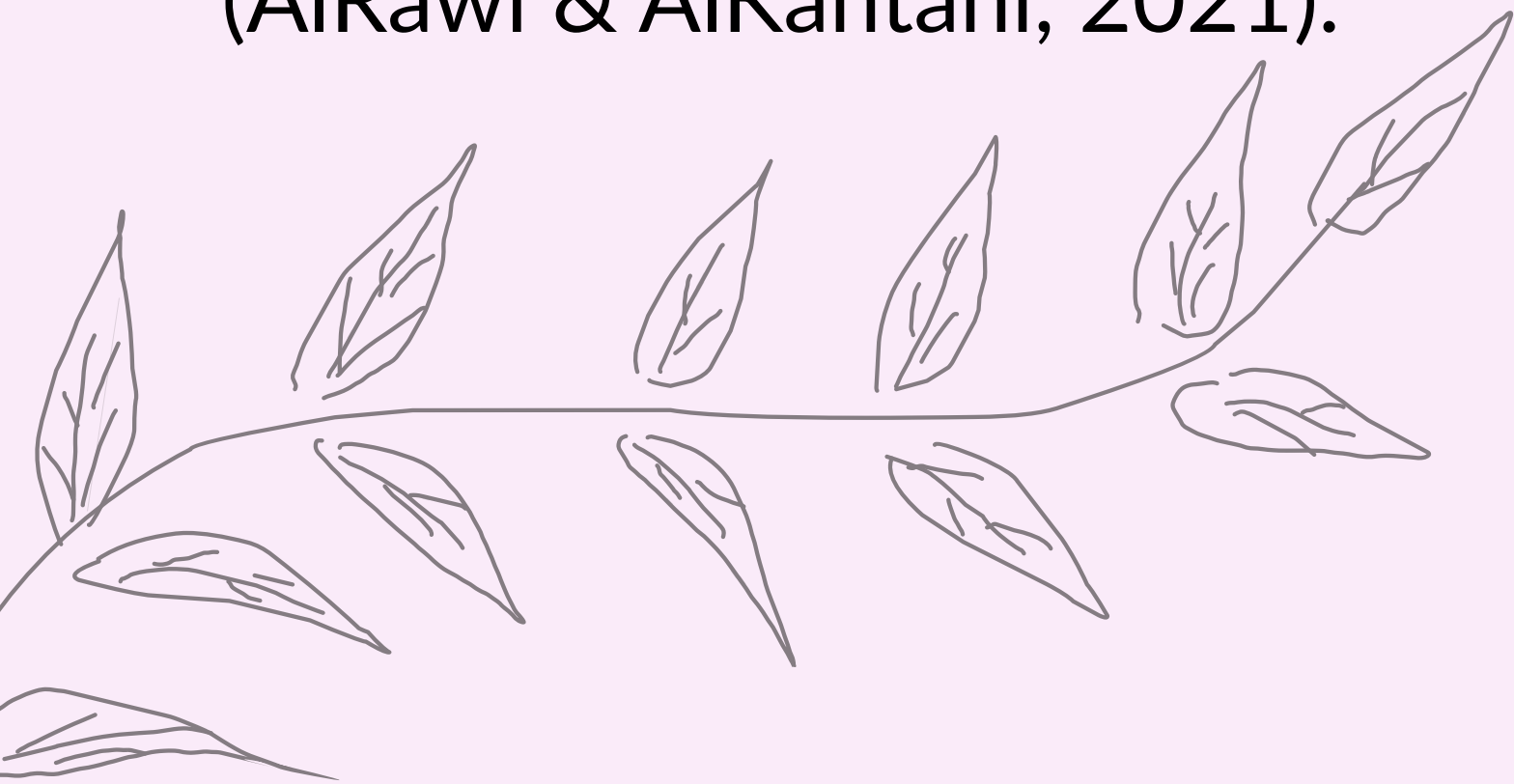
What policy emphasizes:

- Individual Education Plans (IEPs)
- Accommodations and modifications
- Tailored supports for students with exceptionalities

What this can look like in practice:

- Adapting instruction to meet diverse learning needs
- Embedding supports into everyday classroom activities
- Avoiding practices that isolate or single out students

Approaches such as Universal Design for Learning emphasize designing learning environments that are accessible to all students from the start (AlRawi & AlKahtani, 2021).



Inclusion is not just about individual plans, it's about flexible teaching for everyone.



Belonging & Participation

What policy emphasizes:

- Student well-being
- Sense of belonging
- Participation in learning environments

What this can look like in practice:

- Creating a classroom where all students feel valued
- Encouraging collaboration and peer relationships
- Ensuring every child is actively included in learning

Research highlights that students' sense of belonging and participation is central to meaningful inclusion (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Koller et al., 2025).



Inclusion is not just about being present, it's about feeling like you belong.

The Big Takeaway

In Ontario policy, inclusion is framed in two key ways:

Procedural Inclusion

- Identification
- Assessment
- Documentation
- Individual planning

Relational Inclusion

- Belonging
- Participation
- Well-being
- Collaboration



This dual framing reflects broader research showing that inclusion involves both system-level structures and meaningful participation for students (Dionne et al., 2025).

True inclusion happens when BOTH are balanced.



What This Means for Educators

To support inclusive practice:

- Balance documentation with meaningful relationships
- Focus on student strengths, not just needs
- Use flexible teaching strategies that support all learners
- Create classroom environments where every child feels included

Research consistently shows that educator beliefs, practices, and classroom environments play a key role in shaping inclusive experiences (Bolourian et al., 2022).



Inclusion is not just something you do, it's something students
experience.

Why Reflection Matters

Inclusive practice is not something you “get right” once, it is something you continuously build, question, and adjust. Reflection helps you notice patterns, challenge assumptions, and make small, meaningful changes that support all learners.

Understanding the Child

- What patterns am I noticing over time?
- When is this child most engaged? Least engaged?
- What strengths can I build from?

Examining my Perspective

- Am I focusing more on challenges than strengths?
- What assumptions might I be making?
- How might my expectations shape this child's experience?

Looking Ahead

- What will I watch for after this change?
- How will I know it's helping?
- What might I try next?

Balancing Support & Labels

- Am I supporting needs without defining the child by them?
- Have I tried flexible strategies before labeling?
- How can I describe this child in a strength-based way?

Looking at the Environment

- Does my classroom support different ways of learning?
- What barriers might exist?
- What small changes could improve participation?

Take Action

Printable

Choose one small, meaningful step to try. Keep it realistic, you don't need to change everything at once.

- ☐ **Adjust a routine** (e.g. transitions, circle time, group activities)
- ☐ **Add a new support** (e.g. visuals, movement breaks, peer support, flexible seating)
- ☐ **Shift your documentation** (e.g. focus on strengths, learning progress, or engagement)
- ☐ **Try a different engagement strategy** (e.g. hands-on learning, choice, incorporating interests)
- ☐ **Collaborate with others** (e.g. connect with a colleague, EA, or family member)

My Next Step

What is one specific change I will try?

When will I try this?

What will I watch for?

What will I do next based on what I observe?

Reminder

Small changes, consistently applied, lead to meaningful inclusion.

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