Renfrewshire CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES)

Working within an Inclusive Early Years Learning Environment

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A comment on neuro-affirming practice

The neurodiversity paradigm, influenced by the experiences of neurodivergent individuals, has led to a significant re-evaluation of past research and approaches to inclusive practice. This shift challenges established views and encourages the development of neuro-affirming practices in education, including Early Learning and Childcare settings. At the heart of this change is moving away from seeing neurological differences as disorders. This approach acknowledges that difficulties often result from how individuals interact with their environments, not just from individual's profiles. Neuro-affirming practices promote acceptance, understanding, and highlight the voices and needs of neurodivergent people. The National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) have produced guidance and Key Messages for primary aged children, which also have relevance to younger learners. Please see the following link for an overview, and the NAIT team online information for further detail: https://www.thirdspace.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NAIT-Key-Messages-for-Primary-Schools.pdf.

This document contains:

- A description of what is meant by an inclusive early years learning environment and why it is important.
- Information on developing an inclusive learning environment, including early years staff's most valued supports and strategies.
- The CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES).
- Discussion points to support reflection.
- The CIRCLE Planning Page.

Contents

What is an Inclusive Early Learning Environment?

All learners are influenced by the physical and social environment, including the room and surroundings, the people around them, how they feel about themselves, and their interest in the tasks they have been asked to do. An inclusive early learning environment is one where the practitioner routinely incorporates key supports and strategies into their everyday practice which take account of this. These supports and strategies focus on "tuning" the physical and social environment; establishing structures and routines throughout the day; and implementing learner-centred approaches to enhance motivation and engagement with the learning process.

Why is it important?

The supports and strategies which contribute to an inclusive early learning environment not only benefit those with identified additional support needs, but also enhance the learning and participation of all.

Setting up an inclusive environment is the first stage in supporting learners with additional support needs to be successful learner, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors.

Within every space there are learners with a diverse range of needs who would benefit from specific support. Individual practitioners are responsible for the learning and inclusion of all learners and together with the leadership team should ensure that support is in place to achieve this. Setting up an inclusive early learning environment is a practical way of providing support for all learners by optimising the physical and social environment; putting in place structures and routines to support engagement; and by utilising approaches to support motivation.

An inclusive early learning environment reduces the extent to which further additional support is required for specific learners and allows the implementation of individual support to be minimally intrusive.

Considerations when setting up an Inclusive Space

Setting up an inclusive space involves implementation of whole establishment approaches to inclusion, structured preparation, and planning, and ensuring a learner-centred approach.

Whole establishment approaches

These are approaches which are used consistently throughout the establishment to support inclusion.

These whole establishment approaches will support the physical and social environment within the establishment and spaces, ensure that structures and routines take place regularly, and provide opportunities for practitioners to develop their skills to support all learners.

The whole establishment approach includes policies, procedures, and systems which:

- Create an ethos where all learners and families are made to feel welcome and included and individual differences and cultures and respected and celebrated.
- Encourage engagement of parents/carers' (e.g., processes for effective planning, formal and informal communications, events etc. – with consideration given to cultural differences and need for interpretation services).
- Considers resources to enable practitioners to support all learners (e.g., equipment, consistent visual supports, culturally inclusive materials, etc.).
- Provide a consistent approach to promoting positive relationships.
- Set clear routines (e.g., for outdoors, independent mealtimes, start and end of day, etc.).
- Enable two-way flow of communication between staff (both within and external to the establishment).
- Support professional learning.
- Make reasonable adjustments to the environment, routines, and practices (e.g., height of sinks, timetables, and personalised planning etc.).

Considerations when setting up an Inclusive Learning Environment

Learner-centred approach

This involves individualising activities and responsive planning according to need, taking account of the different social and cultural circumstances for each learner.

It requires taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each learner to ensure that the curriculum offers: challenge and enjoyment; breadth; progression; depth; personalisation and choice; coherence and relevance.

It includes:

- Considering and addressing the range of different approaches to learning that may be present.
- Getting to know the learners as individuals and anticipating their needs.
- Asking and considering learners' views.
- Personalising support where possible.

Adopting a learner-centred approach is particularly important for engaging the motivation and interest of learners.

Preparation and planning

The first step to setting up an inclusive space is being organised. This includes having a good understanding of the collective (and individual) needs of the learners and a knowledge of which learners require specific supports and strategies. Playroom set up/layout, experiences, and resources can then be planned to account for and address these collective needs.

At times of transition, it is useful to liaise with the future school to ensure that successful supports and strategies are carried forward.

Understanding specific learners' needs will require reflection on your own knowledge and experience, discussions with colleagues who may have experience in that area and consideration of professional learning requirements.

Preparation and planning are therefore essential prerequisites to setting up a supportive physical and social environment, establishing positive structures and routines and developing approaches to enhance motivation.

Setting up an Inclusive Learning Environment

Practitioners use a range of supports and strategies to manage an inclusive space. These supports and strategies are recognised as being core to good practice and can be used by any practitioner and modified to suit the environment.

Effective practitioners adopt reflective and dynamic approaches, tailoring these strategies, including high quality invitations and provocations in learning. Discussion with colleagues in the establishment, partner services and agencies (e.g., Early Years teaching team and Educational Psychology Service), parents/carers, or learners themselves, will help you modify, adapt, and refine the supports and strategies in light of changing circumstances.

Keeping a clear record of how you implement supports and strategies which are effective will provide evidence of your own professional learning.

The following pages give suggestions of points to consider when optimising the Physical and Social Environment, putting in place Structures and Routines to support engagement, and utilising approaches to support Motivation.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment refers to the physical layout of the classroom and the resources used within it.

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The social environment is concerned with the attitudes, expectations, and actions of those within the establishment and how these can affect learners either positively or negatively.

INCLUSIVE EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FRAMEWORK

STRUCTURES AND ROUTINES

Structures and routines are events that happen in the same way with regularity. The start, middle and end of the routine becomes predictable through repetition.

MOTIVATION

Motivation gives learners incentive, enthusiasm and interest when engaging with activities and people around them. Learners are motivated by their own feelings, desires, self-esteem, and confidence.

The CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES)

An inclusive space is dependent on the physical environment, the social environment, and structures and routines. All these impact on the motivation, organisation, and participation of learners. Because of the multiple dimensions of the environment, it can impact in various ways: either positively supporting learners or negatively interfering with their participation.

The CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES) provides a rating of how different aspects of the environment impact on learners. The CIELES enables you to assign a rating to each of these so that current good practice, and areas to develop, within the environment can be easily identified.

The CIELES comprises 3 ratings tables (one each for the physical environment, the social environment, and structures and routines) and a summary page. You will also find a set of reflective questions adjacent to each of the ratings tables which will help you when considering the different aspects of your environment.

Summary of CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES)

Name of Evaluator

Establishment

Date

Using the information from the previous pages, complete the summary score sheet and keep as a record of how inclusive your environment is at a given time in the year.

This can be used to quickly identify any areas of current good practice and areas to develop. This, along with the previous pages, can help you to develop a plan for any improvements required.

You can use the CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Planning Page to document your plan for improvement. The CIELES provides a score which can be used as a baseline and then repeated to show the effect of any changes made to the environment.

RATING SCALE

4 Environment strongly supports participation of learner(s) by providing exceptional opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

3 Environment supports participation of learner(s) by providing appropriate opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

2 Environment interferes with participation of learner(s) by providing limited opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

1 Environment strongly interferes with participation of learner(s) by not providing opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

Category	Aspect				
Physical Environment	Accessibility of Space	4	3	2	1
	Adequacy of Space	4	3	2	1
	Sensory Space	4	3	2	1
	Visual Supports	4	3	2	1
	Availability of Objects	4	3	2	1
Social Environment	Attitudes	4	3	2	1
	Support and Facilitation	4	3	2	1
	Relationships	4	3	2	1
	Provision of Information	4	3	2	1
	Empowerment	4	3	2	1
Structures and Routines	Experience Levels	4	3	2	1
	Expectations and Boundaries	4	3	2	1
	Appeal of Experiences	4	3	2	1
	Routines	4	3	2	1

The CIELES Rating Scale

The CIELES uses the same 4-point rating scale for all items to be rated. The 4-point rating scale functions as follows:

4 Environment **strongly supports** participation of learner(s) by providing exceptional opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

3 Environment **supports** participation of learner(s) by providing appropriate opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

2 Environment **interferes** with participation of learner(s) by providing limited opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

1 Environment **strongly interferes** with participation of learner(s) by not providing opportunities, resources, requirements, and structures.

Assigning these ratings 1-4 requires professional judgement. Criteria statements are provided which refer to the item being rated. These relate directly to the rating scale and will assist you to narrow down which rating to use. Additionally, you can refer to the reflective questions which will further support you when considering what is required in an inclusive environment.

It is not anticipated that you will spend a great deal of time selecting the appropriate rating; if it is unclear, choose the lower rating. Compare collegiately and with the leadership team.

Completing the CIELES

The CIELES can be stored as improvement evidence and evidence of your own professional learning. You may also wish to gather children's voices on this environment from their perspective.

The CIELES can be repeated as often as required to demonstrate changes or improvements. Together with the Planning Page, it can be used as evidence of reflective practice and your development towards an inclusive space.

Interpreting and Using the Results

The results of the CIELES will help to identify the areas of current good practise and areas to develop that will make your space more inclusive.

It is essential to focus any efforts for improvement on things which are under your control. For example, if you have rated 'Adequacy of Space' as '1' due to building constraints, this would be outside your control.

When you identify areas requiring development from the CIELES, you can make a plan using the Planning Page. This provides a structure for you to document and evidence how you are developing the principles of an inclusive space.

CIELES: The Physical Environment

Items and descriptor	Rating	Criteria Statements
Accessibility of Space *Barrier free* *Ease of access*	4	Accessibility exemplary, exceptional placing of furniture, barrier free
	3	Good accessibility to spaces, barrier free
	2	Some barriers accessing spaces, some areas inaccessible
	1	Barriers including clutter, significant challenges accessing spaces
Adequacy of Space *Availability of spaces* *Tailored to needs* *Set up of spaces including seating*	4	Exemplary availability of different areas and seating for meeting needs
	3	Variety of areas and seating available when needed, available spaces match requirements
	2	Constraints of available space, some needs not met by spaces or seating
	1	Spaces not matching needs, overcrowded, required spaces or seating not available
Sensory Space *Temperature / Noise / Lighting / Odour* *Adjustability* *Self-calming*	4	Excellent sensory conditions, temperature pleasant, lighting and/or noise levels optimised for sensory preferences
	3	Comfortable sensory conditions for example temperature light and/or noise levels adjustable
	2	Some challenges with sensory conditions, variable ability to adjust these, e.g., unwanted noise
	1	Too hot or too cold, noisy, poor lighting, distracting orders - sensory conditions not adjustable or adjusted
Visual Supports *Signs and labels* *Objects of reference* *Visual timetables, photos, symbols* *Posters / Displays* *Now-Next or First-Then*	4	Excellent use of visual supports meeting individual needs, consistently used and applied
	3	Effective use of visual supports meeting needs, mostly consistent
	2	Challenges and the number and variety of visual supports, difficult to read/understand, some needs not met, some inconsistency
	1	Visual supports are limited/ambiguous/inconsistent, learners cannot understand, needs not met
Availability of Objects *Objects accessible* *Objects suitable* *Adaptive devices*	4	Availability of objects exemplary, storage in close proximity, objects match to characteristics/needs/cultures of learners, independently accessible, well maintained
	3	Ease of access to all needed objects when desired, storage adequate, matched to personal characteristics slash needs of learners, well maintained
	2	Challenges accessing objects, variable storage, some objects not matched personal characteristics or needs of learners
	1	Some objects not available, objects not accessible, objects not adequate for personal characteristics or needs of learners, poorly maintained

Accessibility of Space

- Are there any hazards in the physical space?
- Can learners move around the space easily?
- Can learners access other areas of the building with ease?
- Is the space adapted to meet physical needs?
- Is the space organised and uncluttered?

Adequacy of Space

- Do you think the space suits learners needs?
- Can you alter your space to suit the needs of learners?
- Is the space set up to promote good interaction?
- Does the space facilitate learning opportunities?
- Are quiet spaces available?

Sensory Space

- Do you have concerns about the sensory environment (e.g., lighting, noise, temperature, odour)
- Can the sensory environment be altered easily?
- How do you know the sensory environment is suitable for all learners?
- Are agreed sensory support available and in place?
- Is the environment adapted to meet sensory needs (consider lighting and noise levels)?
- Are a variety of sensory experiences offered?

Visual Supports

- What visual supports are used in the space?
- Is a consistent format for visuals and symbols used across the establishment?
- Is the symbol ladder considered for visuals? (e.g., progression from object to photo to drawing)
- Are visual cues and supports in place?
- Are signs and displays or visual multilingual and multicultural?
- Are signs, displays, and visual supports at child height?

- Is clear and consistent labelling used to identify resources and resource cupboards?
- Is a visual timetable or now-next boards used?
- Are any of the visual supports over-stimulating or distracting?

Availability of Objects

- Do learners have easy access to the equipment or resources they need?
- Are the available objects suited to the needs of learners? (e.g., consider seat and table height, types of pens, pencils, scissors)
- Is technology available and fully utilised? (e.g., Interactive Whiteboard, ICT)
- Are objects and resources positioned consistently and appropriately?
- Can learners independently access resources so that they can develop responsibility for these?
- Is safety considered when offering resources? (e.g., size and type of resources)
- Are resources and objects related to children's interests and motivations?

CIELES: The Social Environment

Items and descriptor	Rating	Criteria Statements
Attitudes *Empathy* *Understanding* *Non-judgmental* *Respecting others*	4	Staff and peers in environment display, reinforce and value exceptional attitudes, and are highly empathic, non-judgmental
	3	Staff and peers in environment are actively developing and modelling empathy and inclusiveness and are non-judgmental
	2	Some challenges with negative attitudes and how these are addressed
	1	Staff or peers are dismissive, judgmental, exclusionary, condescending, bullying
Support and Facilitation *Verbal support* *Non-verbal support* *Physical support* *Appropriate communication*	4	Expert support using variety of prompts, encouragement, demonstration, adapted to individual needs, and promotes independence over time
	3	Appropriate support using prompts, encouragement, demonstration, takes account of different needs, and builds confidence in learners
	2	Limited support and/or one form of support only/support not personalised to reflect needs/support leads to increased dependence
	1	Minimal or ineffective support, support does not reflect needs
Relationships *Practitioners and peers* *Accepting atmosphere* *Sense of belonging* *Opportunities for relationship building*	4	Exemplary, with diverse opportunities for positive social interaction and relationship building within establishment and wider community
	3	Good relationships and opportunities for social interaction, strong establishment identity
	2	Some challenges with practitioners supporting relationship building and/or conflict restoration
	1	Opportunities for relationship building are poor
Provision of Information *Accessible* *Clear* *Variety of formats* *Parents/carers and learners*	4	Proactive provision of information, several formats, shared and easily accessible
	3	Information provided in a variety of formats
	2	Challenges with sharing information, information not always clear
	1	Minimal information or mixed messages; complexity or quantity inappropriate
Empowerment *Support for autonomy* *Learner-centred* *Responding to needs and views*	4	Excellent promotion of independence, proactive seeking of child's voice
	3	Learners actively involved in the life of the establishment/leading learning; child's voice sought
	2	Child's voice inconsistently sought; practitioners do not use child's voice to enhance learning opportunities
	1	Child's voice not sought, lack of opportunities for independence, children's interests not considered

Attitudes

- Is a learner centred approach used consistently?
- Are individual differences respected and diversity highlighted and celebrated? (e.g., availability of books in relevant languages)
- Are learners made to feel that their voice is valued?
- Is support offered sensitively and timely?
- Are approaches to teaching wellbeing embedded? (e.g., social skills, emotions, mental wellbeing)
- Do adults model enthusiasm for tasks?
- Are children able to choose their own level of involvement? (e.g., observing peers, short participation)

Support and Facilitation

- Are the practitioners responsive to learners' needs, do they anticipate needs? What kind of support is given to learners (physical, verbal, visual cues)?

- Is the complexity of language used considered?
- Is the pace and quantity of information given considered?
- Are complex instructions broken into clear steps?
- Is demonstration and/or modelling used?
- Is verbal information supported with non-verbal information? (e.g., gesture, pictures, or written words)
- Is praise and positive reinforcement given regularly?
- Does support lead to increased independence and autonomy over time?

Relationships

- How would you describe the relationship of (a) learners with staff (b) between the learners?
- Are small group activities utilised?
- Are activities regularly included to build relationships?
- Do lenders feel valued and secure?
- Do practitioners support one another to address difficult relationships between adults or adults and children?

Information

- How is information shared with learners and parents/carers?

- Is information (for learners and parents/carers) easily available in a variety of formats?
- Are interpreting services used, if required, to translate information?
- Is the regular collaboration with parents/carers?
- How do practitioners know that information has been received and understood by all relevant parties (e.g., parents/carers, learners)?

Empowerment

- How do practitioners support problem solving and building independence?
- How to do practitioners encourage learners to express their needs, take responsibility, or be autonomous?
- How is sense of self nurtured?
- Are children encouraged to be leaders of their own learning?
- Is child's voice evident in planning and documentation?
- Is the use of first language encouraged?
- Is children's voice sought?
- Do learners see adults responding to their views and ideas?
- Do learners contribute to the life of the establishment?

CIELES: The Structures and Routines

Items and descriptor	Rating	Criteria Statements
Experience Levels *Too easy/too hard* *Enjoyment/satisfaction* *Just right challenge* *Matched to ability*	4	Experiences promote exceptionally appropriate and creative challenge and enjoyment with excellent engagement
	3	Experiences appropriate to allow for 'just right challenge', almost all learners engaged most of the time
	2	Experience demands are somewhat high/low, some boredom/stress
	1	Experience demands too high/too low, causing boredom/stress
Expectations and Boundaries *Clarity* *Consistency* *Effect on learners*	4	Exceptionally clear expectations provided in a variety of formats and consistently applied
	3	Expectations provided in a variety of formats and almost always consistently applied
	2	Challenges with expectations, some learner disengagement or anxiety
	1	Expectations unclear and inconsistent, learners disengaged or anxious
Appeal of Experiences *Value* *Attraction* *Interest* *Authenticity*	4	Very positive perception and understanding of the value of experiences offered to learners, variety evident, tailored to interests/cultures
	3	Attraction to the experience offered, variety, some experiences tailored to learners' interests/cultures
	2	Challenge in how experiences are offered which limits their appeal, learners' interests/cultures not reflected
	1	Experiences are not appealing, learners disinterested, little or no understanding of purpose
Routines *Structure* *Predictability* *Consistency*	4	Structured routines all exemplary, accommodates for individual preferences, high levels of consistency, promote sense of belonging
	3	Appropriate structured routine, offers consistency, good preparation for change
	2	Challenges with how routine is structured, variable consistency, some unpredictability
	1	Little or no routine or structure provided throughout the day/week, unpredictability

Reflective Questions: The Structures and Routines

Experience Levels

- How do you make sure the level of the experience matches the ability of the learners? Consider your continuous provision.
- Do experiences provide appropriate challenge and enjoyment for all?
- Is success celebrated or displayed?
- Is there a focus on praising process as well as product?
- Do learners engage with a range of experiences?
- How do practitioners monitor engagement with experiences?

Expectations and Boundaries

- Are high expectations modelled?
- How do you make sure learners are aware of these?
- Is there a consistent approach to encourage positive behaviour?
- Are expectations displayed and referred to regularly?
- Are boundaries fair and consistent?
- Are triggers for escalation recognised and minimised?
- Are relationships considered within expectations and boundaries?

Appeal of Experiences

- How do experiences follow the interests of learners?
- Are learners' interests and cultures considered?
- Is experiential learning utilised?
- Are multisensory approaches used?
- Is technology used to engage interest?
- Do learners understand the value and purpose of the experiences?

Routines

- How do you help learners with their daily and weekly routines and transitions?
- How do you support learners to understand routines and to understand changes to routines?
- How do you prepare learners before each change?
- How do you support learners to practice and prepare for new experiences?
- Are there opportunities for practice and repetition?

Reflection and Discussion Points

? Having completed the CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES), how inclusive do you think your practice is?

Which supports and strategies do you currently use to ensure your practice is learner-centred?

? What steps do you take to ensure that you understand the needs of individual learners?

How do you evidence the supports and strategies that you use?

? Which strategies would you like to add to or develop in your current practice? How might you do this?

Considering learners who already have individual supports or strategies in place, how could you adapt these to make them suitable for all?

? Where do you evidence your planning for individual learners?

Who do you (could you) use as a critical friend to reflect on your practice with?

? How does the implementation of supports and strategies by your critical friend/peer support differ from your own practice?

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Name of Evaluator

_____

Establishment

_____

Date

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CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES) Planning Page

You could make a plan below by writing down which areas to target based on the information from the CIRCLE Inclusive Early Learning Environment Scale (CIELES).

Date

_____

Establishment

_____

Date at review

_____

Completed by

_____

From your completed CIELES what are the key areas that you have chosen to develop? (Consider those with a lower score.)

Write down key strategies that could be introduced or used more consistently to help you develop this area.

HOW WILL IT BE ACHIEVED?

Things to implement / change / develop?

Who will be involved?

Resources / Training Needed

OUTCOME AT REVIEW

The CIELES score in this area has increased / decreased / remained the same.

Next Steps

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CIELES Extended Planning Page

You could use this page to plan your changes and record progress with these. This will allow you to record more information than the planning page above.

What are you going to change or develop?	How will you measure this? How will you know things have improved?	Who is leading/ involved?	Start/ Review date	What was the impact? What difference did this make to the environment or child?	What now? Adopt, adapt, or abandon?