

What is inclusion? A focus on disabled children and their families in early childhood education.

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Inclusive practice in early childhood education is seen as a matter of “removing any barriers to participation and learning” in the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, p. 13). However, what those barriers might be how to ‘remove’ them, is not always clear, and with negative attitudes proclaimed the biggest barrier to inclusion (Cologon, 2019), it is not easy for kaiako (teachers) and families to dismantle such barriers. This article aims to discuss what inclusive practice is and what it is not, based on the literature review of the research study I carried out as part of the requirements for my PhD with the University of Auckland (Whyte, In progress). Since the study’s focus is on the parents of a disabled child attending early childhood education, I will discuss inclusion from a parent’s as well as the children’s and teachers’ perspective.

Introduction

Most nations, including New Zealand, have signed, and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), drawn up in 2006. The Convention is a follow on from the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which provided a framework for inclusive education, challenging negative attitudes towards inclusion and promoting solidarity amongst children (UNESCO, 1994). While the Salamanca accord advocated for inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools worldwide, the statement was not binding, and instead of decreasing, the enrolments of children going to specialist schools have increased to 5.1% in 2019 in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, cited in Graham et al. 2023), 6% in New Zealand over the past five years (RNZ News, December 2022), and 33% in the United Kingdom (Dunkley, BBC News, 2023), despite the commitment expressed in the CRPD to work towards full inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD is a binding statement and aims to combat stereotypes and seeing disabled people in light of their merits and abilities, fostering an awareness and respect for the rights of persons with disabilities in children from an early age. This article will focus on inclusive practice in early childhood education and look at the barriers to inclusive practice seen from the perspectives of teachers, children, and their parents. I will also look at some strategies towards inclusive practice. It is hoped that this will contribute to a greater awareness of what inclusion is and what it is not and as such may support reflective practice, internal review on inclusive practice, and beginning teachers’ readiness to teach.

What is inclusion?

Although the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has done a lot to promote inclusion of all children in mainstream education, it does not have a clear definition of inclusion. This is why a special committee of the United Nations has formulated further guidance, called ‘General Comments’ on some of the articles, such as article 24 on education. Noticing that a clear definition of what is inclusion is absent in article 24 of the CRPD, the United Nations has provided a definition in ‘General Comment nr 4 (GC4), describing inclusion as:

“A process of *systematic reform*, embodying changes and *modifications* in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers, with a vision serving to promote all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences” (United Nations, 2016, para 11).

While this is a lengthy definition, this definition shows the child needs to be learning with and alongside their own age group, and the teacher needs to make adaptations to the curriculum to provide equitable learning outcomes. This means that putting students with disabilities in a classroom or early childcare and education centre without making any changes or any adjustments to the curriculum or teaching strategies, is not inclusive practice. The GC4 explains this further by specifying that neither *exclusion*, *segregation* or *integration* constitute inclusion (United Nations, 2016, para 11). We can learn more about inclusion by exploring these terms in further depth.

Exclusion

Ballard (2011) explains that to understand inclusion, it is important to understand *exclusion* first. Exclusion is when children are directly or indirectly denied access to a school or early child care and education centre. The Education Review Office (2022) found that 26% of parents who have a child with a disability in New Zealand, have been discouraged or refused access to an ECE centre. Dares (2018) explains that exclusion often involves reductionist and dualistic ways of thinking, influenced by ingrained norms in society that stipulate who are ‘in’ and who are ‘out,’ which children are fitting the norms, and who are not. Exclusionary ways of thinking lead to ‘othering’ and marginalisation (Foucault, 1977) and can be very hard to change as they are ingrained in our society and go unchallenged, so often that people become unaware they are doing it. Having to live up to a certain standard of success in school and society, is called ableism (Allan, 2019; Graham et al, 2023). Ableism is a normative way of thinking and can be hard to spot as Adamson (2022) found in an analysis on the National Education and Learning Priorities Policy Statement [NELPS]. Despite a commitment to inclusion of all children with learning needs,

“there remains a strong undercurrent of competition,” which is visible in the terminology used such as ‘sufficient progress,’ and ‘key foundational skills,’ (Adamson, 2022, p. 567). Ballard (2011) and Janzen (2019) encourage people to ‘think differently’ and instead of seeing a child as not fitting in, they challenge teachers and parents to see the child in a positive light and be curious about the child’s different ways of thinking.

Segregation

Segregation happens when the child is placed in a separate area to be educated, removed from their peers. An example is when the child goes to a specialist school, while her or his peers are going to the local primary school (MacArthur, 2023). Another example is a child in the early childhood care and education centre working one-on-one with their Education Support Worker in a way that does not invite any of the other children to join in (United Nations, 2016). While the motive for this strategy may be helping the child concentrate on set goals, this clashes with the socio-cultural theory in early childhood education where the teachers follow the child’s interest and children are enabled to learn through play alongside their peers (Foster-Cohen & Van Bijleveldt, 2016). The United Nations (2016, p. 10) advises “active participation with other students.” The decision to segregate the child to focus on a specific task comes from a deficit perspective of the child, based on the medical model that believes the child needs ‘fixing’ (Buffington- Adams & Vaughn, 2019; McKenzie et al., 2016). Nusbaum and Steinborn (2019) point out that the focus on a specific task decided on by the teacher, does not allow the child to set their own goals and take a lead in their own learning, as expressed by the principle of empowerment in the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Hehir et al., cited in Cologon (2019), add that including the child in small group activities with the other children on the other hand, has benefits for *all* students and that “large scale studies over almost five decades have found that inclusive education produces superior social and developmental outcomes” (Baker et al., 1995, Carlberg & Kavale, 1980, Oh-Young & Filler, 2015, Salend & Garrik Duharey, 1999, cited in De Bruin, 2020, p. 59). Davis et al. (2020) concludes that inclusive education is a human right and highlights General Comment 6 of the United Nations (2018) which states that segregated settings are discriminatory.

Integration

The third concept that gets confused with inclusive practice is *integration*. The concept of integration is often erroneously believed to be inclusion by the teachers because it is seen as helping the child to fit in and abide by the rules, however as Cologon (2019) points out, integration places the responsibility to fit in with the child without providing an equitable learning environment, which is not inclusive practice. Instead, the teacher needs to make adjustments to the environment, resources, and interactions to meet the child’s needs (NELPS, 2020) and make the curriculum accessible to the child, which is equitable practice. This is part of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2006, 2016). In Aotearoa New Zealand

inclusive practice is compulsory for all licensed early childhood care and education services following the early childhood curriculum (MoE, 2021), which insists that “every child has the right to equitable opportunities to participate actively in the learning community” (MoE, 2017, p. 36) and children are encouraged to “treat others fairly and including them in play” (p. 37). However, getting children to include children who are outside of their group in their play is not as easy as it sounds. Watson (2019) found that simply making a rule that “we are all friends” does not work, as ultimately children only become included in the actual act of playing together, following the rules of turn-taking in play, and behaving as a friend. Kavač and Vaale (2021) explain that inclusion can be difficult to achieve because unlike belonging, which often is established by liking similar things or things that are familiar to us, inclusion simultaneously carries the expectation that differences are acknowledged and respected. Early childhood teachers are often busy trying to resolve conflict between children due to their differences, however when it comes to inclusive practice, differences cannot be ignored. Kavač and Vaale (2021) reiterate that ultimately “the aim is to establish a baseline where diversity is perceived as a ‘normal’ state of affairs” (p. 1213).

The barriers to inclusive practice seen from a teachers’ perspective

Foster-Cohen and Van Bijleveldt (2016) found that a significant barrier to inclusive practice in early childhood education and school is that many teachers lack the training to include disabled children confidently. McAnelly (2022) for example explains that teachers often overlook the different way in which autistic children learn, explaining that due to sensitivity to sound, movement and light, the child might pick up on ‘intra-activity’ with materials and objects in the environment in ways that other children might not. A fascination with the flow of sand, water or objects catching the light for example, is just as valid an interest as an interest in dinosaur or cars, however teachers might find it hard to plan a follow up for the subtle interaction of materials. Another example is when a disabled child displays a lack of communication or communicates differently. Puroila et al. (2021) explain that children form friendships based on similarities, so when a child lacks language, their peers often try to communicate with them in similar ways. Here it is paramount for the teacher to position disabled children as “competent and confident learners” (MoE, 2017, p. 5) and share this perception with the other children (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019), encouraging peers to use ‘rich language’ with the child. In addition, teachers could model and support interactions with peers to achieve “full and effective participation” (United Nations, 2016, p. 3).

Three further issues that may become a barrier to inclusive practice are the lack of availability of and wait times for specialist support such as Speech Language Therapy and Early Intervention (Foster-Cohen & Van Bijleveldt, 2016), Education Support Workers not being trained ECE teachers (Macartney, 2019) and enrolment of children with additional learning needs being disproportionately high in some centres, due to the high number of children being discouraged enrolment at other centres (ERO, 2022). The lack of ECE

training of Education Support Workers, makes it especially challenging for teachers, as the Ministry of Health, who employs the Education Support Workers, follows the medical model of disability (Spooner, 2020). As indicated above one-on-one interaction with the child, hinders participation and learning as the child misses out on small group interactions and forming relationships, which is one of the benefits of inclusive practice (Blackmore et al., 2016). The biggest barrier to inclusion yet however, is that of negative attitudes (Cologon, 2019), an ongoing and far-reaching issue, which will be discussed below.

The barriers to inclusive practice seen from a parents' perspective

Negative attitudes impact on inclusive practice both directly, and indirectly. In direct ways, children tend to exclude other children whom they perceive as different, in their own quest for belonging (Slee, 2019; Macartney, 2016). Samuel (2022) explains that people (children) sometimes do exclude others by forming a boundary of who is and who is not part of the group of friends, because it creates a greater sense of belonging for them. When this happens, it is important that teachers promote both assimilation (pointing out commonalities, liking the same things) and differentiation (celebrating their differences) at the same time (Kavač & Vaale, 2021). Macartney (2011) and Samuel (2022) further explain that negatively labelling a child can be more disabling than the disability itself; Macartney (2011) used the expression 'disabled by the discourse'. The power of language as (Burr (2015) calls it, can be actively used by teachers though, to combat exclusion through actively rejecting negative labelling and name calling. Both Cologon (2019) and Graham et al. (2023) explain that *changing* the discourse can bring about a change in attitude, and therefore fosters a culture of inclusion.

Normative attitudes in society often influence decisions parents of disabled children make in terms of their interactions with teachers and other parents in the early childhood care and education centre. When parents become aware that their child might be seen as disruptive or naughty by other parents and children, this can cause the parent to decide to pick up their child early or to not attend special events or excursions (Slee, 2019). Mann et al. (2023) indicate that parents are often aware of the extra time their child needs from the teachers, causing parents to avoid making extra requests and instead being helpful and flexible. Mann et al. (2020) indicate that "it is critical for teachers to have some understanding of what life is like for families of children with a disability, because they are not working with a child in isolation from the family" (p. 345). Due to time constraints, conversations may become more about the child's challenges in the centre, rather than their achievements, which can cause tension between the teacher and the parent, and strain the relationship. Negative perceptions of the disabled child and their parents, is found to affect parents' wellbeing, causing them to withdraw, and form less friendships with other parents in the centre community (Cologon, 2019; Weastell, 2017). Cohen (2022) adds that negative perceptions or stereotyping can be very damaging and hard to change as it causes a divide into 'us,' the people who belong, and 'them,' who do not belong to our group. Mann et al. (2020) therefore believe additional considerations are needed to form successful partnerships with parents of disabled children in

early childhood education and school. A good place to start is checking one's personal assumptions, as stereotyping often happens unconsciously (Cohen, 2022). The United Nations (2016) add that parents must be seen as a valuable resource (GC4, para 12) and should get the necessary help they need to support their child.

Another barrier found by the Office for Disability Issues (2022) in a study involving 118 parents, 130 ECE teachers and 291 service leaders, is that many parents are unclear on the progress their child is making at the care and education centre. The Education Review Office (2022) had similar findings reporting that "over 50% of parents said kaiako (teachers) never or only sometimes discuss their child's next steps in their learning goals with them" (p. 2). Also, the more complex the child's needs are, the *less* often teachers tend to discuss the goals for the child, with 69% of parents reporting that teachers are only sometimes or never discussing their child's learning goals with them (ERO, 2022). Especially when children lack language skills, it may be hard for teachers to determine what the child's interests are and how these link to experiences at home. Both the Education Review Office (2022) and United Nations (2016), therefore recommend setting clear and specific goals for the child. Setting goals *for* the child however, seems at odds with the principle of empowerment in *Te Whāriki* curriculum where the child is encouraged to decide on the next step in their learning themselves. Therefore a 'whole systems approach' needs to be adopted, where all stakeholders work together and "all teachers and other staff [in the learning environment] receive education and training, giving them the core values and competence to accommodate inclusive learning environments" (United Nations, 2016, para 12). Some ideas on how teachers and parents can work together towards inclusion are discussed below.

Inclusion awareness

Graham (2020) thinks of inclusion as more than just a set of teaching strategies, saying that "it is also a philosophy: a way of thinking about people, diversity, teaching and learning" (p. 11). To overcome barriers to inclusion we first need to learn about the social model of disability in which 'disability' is created through the response of the social, environmental and political environment to the disabled person, creating disadvantage. Equity then means the additional support and modifications to the curriculum to lessen this disadvantage. Therefore, equity is not the same as 'equal' (Graham, 2020). To combat disadvantage and inequality, the community needs to be made aware that there is an unfair disadvantage (Dares, 2018). Awareness is the first step to social justice and following this the disabled person (the child and their family) needs to be given a voice, upon which the whole community (teachers, children and parents) works on challenging and changing negative attitudes and beliefs (Dares, 2018). It is part of the rights of the child and their family to build onto the child's individual strengths and abilities (United Nations, 2006). Hawkins (2014) suggests teachers can do this for example by promoting respect and valuing the three D's: Difference, Diversity and Human Dignity, through picture books. Janzen (2019) adds teachers can tap into children's curiosity and willingness to learn about each other. Also, practicing

and teaching the children fairness and empathy, and develop caring attitudes is important for *all* children (Searing, 2014).

Core values to include in Initial Teacher Education for beginning teachers in preparation for inclusive practice include viewing diversity as an asset for education, seeing *all* children as capable learners, team collaboration and continued professional learning and development (Morton et al., 2023). Inclusive practice does not only benefit children who have a disability but the other children in the care and education centre as well. Szumski et al. (2017, cited in Cologon, 2019) point out that the curriculum becomes more sensitive to *all* children's differing needs. Rietveld (2010) who studied strategies in response to children excluding others for example, found it most effective to make resources or strategies available to *all* children. One child with developmental delay for example was using a Tommy Tippee cup and upon being teased by the other children teachers introduced a rule that everyone could have different cups. Teachers develop flexibility in their teaching practice and children become more adaptable and understanding of others. Children can also be exposed to different modes of meaning making and different ways of thinking (McAnelly, 2022).

As indicated above special attention needs to be given to the inclusion of the parents of children who are disabled. Not only are parents of a child who has a disability likely to experience increased stress and face extra challenges, they are also vulnerable to stigmatisation and exclusion as explained by Mann et al. (2020). Cohen (2022) proposes teachers can create opportunities for parents to work together on a small project, calling this 'situation crafting.' Timing and purpose are of essence, however when successful, this strategy can open up new opportunities, roles, and friendships for parents. Clarkin-Phillips (2016) calls this 'creating affordances,' which increases participation and connection between parents. Examples are setting up a coffee corner, creating an inviting space or hosting a workshop or information evening on a specific topic.

Alongside fostering awareness for inclusive practice and creating opportunities for parents to support each other, teachers can also foster a culture of inclusion by introducing positive discourse and discouraging negative labelling. Parents with disabled children typically want their child just be 'one of the kids' and accepted as part of the community (Blackmore et al., 2016). Purdue et al. (2020) point out that children have multiple identities and that being disabled is just part of their identity. Therefore, the authors advocate for 'person-first' language and promoting a positive identity and self-esteem for *all* children.

Conclusion

This article has discussed what inclusion is and what it is not, drawing on clear guidelines of the United Nations (2006, 2016), who have drawn up the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. After

teasing out the difference between inclusion, exclusion, segregation, and integration, barriers to inclusion as seen from the teachers and parents' eyes have been discussed specifically, to highlight some barriers that might stay undetected such as negative attitudes to difference, normative judgments, and stigmatisation. I have finished this article considering how teachers can foster awareness of injustices around inclusion and create a positive, inclusive culture for all. This could support reflective practice and internal review, as well as strengthen teachers' understanding of inclusive practice. This could support reflective practice and internal review, as well as strengthen teachers' understanding of inclusive practice.

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