

COLLOQUIUM

Preventing Inclusion? Inclusive Early Childhood Education and the Option to Exclude

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ABSTRACT While there is increasing international commitment to inclusive education, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), many children remain excluded at school. One marginalised and frequently excluded group of people are people who experience disability. In the recently released first report on Australia under the CRPD, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has found that Australia is failing to meet its obligations under the convention, including failing to uphold the right of all children to inclusive education. Drawing from a conversation with a pre-service early childhood teacher in Australia, this article explores some of the exclusionary structures and practices that form considerable barriers to the realisation of the commitment to inclusive education. The intention of the article is to provoke discussion on these important issues.

Australia has made a clear commitment to inclusive education, including through the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). However, as evident from the submissions to the 2012 review of the Disability Standards for Education, the reality 'on the ground' falls far short of the policy goals and convention requirements (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012). The recently released first report on Australia's progress since ratifying the CRPD in 2008 has found that Australia is failing to meet its obligations to people who experience disability, including the right of all children to inclusive education:

The Committee is concerned that, despite the Disability Standards for Education established to ensure access to education on an equal basis, students with disabilities continue to be placed in special schools and that many of those who are in regular schools are largely confined to special classes or units. It is further concerned that students with disabilities enrolled in regular schools receive a substandard education due to lack of reasonable accommodation. (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2013, p. 7)

Anna [1] is a pre-service early childhood teacher who is participating in current research exploring early childhood teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. She recently undertook a professional experience placement in a Year 1 classroom (second year of formal schooling) in Sydney, Australia. Anna shared with me a situation that troubled her where the cooperating teacher supervising her placement indicated to her that:

she is going to get a professional to suggest that one of the year 1 students should go to a segregated special school because he is so behind on ticking the outcome boxes.

Anna reported feeling that as a student-teacher in this situation it is not her place to 'go against' or resist this process of exclusion for this student. Adding:

I sure know that I will try to prevent that from happening when I teach (I hope) – but how can he meet the curriculum outcomes when he cannot distinguish between letters and numbers and he is in year 1?

This situation illustrates the disconnect Genishi and Dyson (2009) refer to between the diversity of children and increasingly homogenised and regimented classroom practices. It highlights the failure to meet the right to an inclusive education as stipulated in the CRPD. It also brings to mind the ongoing concerns regarding the impact of neo-liberalist agendas on the education of young children (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). Reflecting on the situation in this Year 1 classroom (not unlike many other classroom situations) draws attention to the difficulty posed by the perpetuation of the *option to exclude*. This provokes the question – is the response of this Year 1 teacher to this child a product of the conditioning of teachers to consider that exclusion on the basis of disability is still acceptable (unlike exclusion for other reasons)?

In direct contradiction to its commitment to inclusive education and ratification of the CRPD, Australia, like many other countries, persists with the parallel provision of segregated and ‘mainstream’ educational settings and practices. Thus creating the possibility that when a child (who is labelled ‘disabled’) is assessed as not meeting ‘outcome boxes’ (standardised, grade-based criteria), instead of examining and reflecting on the methods of teaching and the purposes of assessment, exclusion of the child is considered a legitimate response. The option to label and therefore justify exclusion of the child negates the need to engage with the deeper questions in this situation. The teacher may be feeling external pressures to meet grade-based assessment goals and excluding the child removes the need to critically engage with or resist these pressures. Alarming, given the role of teachers in the education of children, the option to exclude also removes the need to critically reflect on practice and search for ways to better support this child in his education – thus limiting or even eliminating the role of the teacher in educating the child.

D’Alessio (2011) describes the situation created in Italy in 1971 when legislation was introduced with the intention of moving towards education of all children together, but the parallel segregated system was still in operation (similar to the Australian context today in which the option to exclude remains present, despite the intended emphasis on inclusive education). In analysing the development of legislation and policy in Italy, D’Alessio notes that the perpetuation of parallel education systems reinforced rather than reduced segregated education, leaving a situation where educational settings ‘easily evaded the enrolment of disabled children whenever they could not (or rather, did not want to) integrate them’ (p. 7). Consequently, legislation was introduced in Italy in 1977 that abolished parallel systems of education, meaning that all children are educated together in Italy from early childhood onwards and the option to exclude was ended in 1977.

Filomena [2], a head teacher who I interviewed in a primary school in Italy in 2012, argued that:

Inclusion is a cultural issue and the school creates culture, it makes the culture but the school is not the only one responsible for it. The school has got an important role in terms of creating the culture but a lot of other agencies outside of school contribute to it also, culture makers should I say. (Cologon, 2013, p. 160)

Is it possible for parallel systems of education to exist without creating a culture of *exclusion* at the expense of improving education for all? If Australia moved to one education system for all as Italy has done, would this (currently common) situation that Anna describes still occur?

Inclusive education is a contentious issue and there is continued debate over what inclusive education means (Cologon, 2013). Nonetheless, with various definitions, international research into inclusive education consistently demonstrates that inclusive education results in better outcomes for all students (see, for example, Kliewer, 2008; Baker-Ericzen et al, 2009; Finke et al, 2009; Giangreco, 2009; Jordan et al, 2009; Vakil et al, 2009; Tanti Burlo, 2010), at least in part because inclusive teachers are more engaged and ‘higher quality’ teachers of all children (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001; Jordan et al, 2010).

Focusing particularly on the curriculum area raised as a concern in the Year 1 classroom where Anna was undertaking professional experience, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2012, n.p.) states that:

The study of English is central to the learning and development of all young Australians. It helps create confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens. It is through the study of English that individuals learn to analyse, understand, communicate with and build relationships with others and with the world around them.

Within the Year 1 Australian English curriculum it is required that '[s]tudents engage with a variety of texts for enjoyment. They listen to, read, view and interpret spoken, written and multimodal texts designed to entertain and inform'. The English curriculum outcomes include an emphasis on understanding different purposes of texts, making connections with personal experience and identifying 'language features, images and vocabulary used to describe characters and events' (ACARA, 2012, n.p.), along with reading aloud, using knowledge of sounds and letters, listening and making meaning from text.

Overarching the curriculum, ACARA identifies the importance of ensuring that 'all students with disability are able to participate in the Australian Curriculum on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs', with access to age-equivalent content, but with variations in access and focus to meet 'individual learning needs, strengths, goals and interests' (ACARA, 2012, n.p.).

The vision and emphasis in the Australian Curriculum contrasts uncomfortably with the idea that if a child is not meeting grade level outcomes, the 'solution' is exclusion. This raises many questions. What pressures are teachers facing and what are the conditions that result in exclusion being considered a valid teaching response? What about the Australian Curriculum approach encourages responsiveness to the diversity of learning and learners? What encourages a uniform, homogenous and regimented approach?

Additionally, why might the need to avoid narrowly defined notions of literacy participation be important here? What might be the benefits to all students if this teacher was able to take a flexible approach to teaching in which meaningful and dignified participation was honoured above the ticking of homogenous 'outcome boxes'?

It is clear that there are many considerations for teaching and assessment in this situation. However, the 'elephant in the room' is the fact that the option to simply exclude this child still exists, thus in reality voiding the requirement to address any of these questions. Even the most well-meaning suggestion that 'special' provision might be 'better' for the (so labelled 'special') child avoids addressing issues of how children are constructed, taught, and assessed.

The perpetuation of parallel segregated and 'mainstream' educational systems forms a major barrier to engagement with the genuine diversity of children and violates the rights of children who experience disability (under the CRPD). Bringing about inclusive education in reality requires rethinking underlying assumptions that continue to permit exclusion of some children – once they can be categorised and labelled as a stigmatised 'other' – and recognising that teaching is fundamentally a process of engaging with diversity.

It has been argued that ending segregated educational provision in Italy is only the first step towards inclusion, but it is an important one (D'Alessio, 2011; Cologon, 2013). While not negating the importance of the many steps needed in bringing inclusive education to a reality, ultimately, it seems the benefits of inclusive education will not be realised for the majority until the option to exclude is removed.

Note

[1] This is a pseudonym.

[2] This is a pseudonym.

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