# Philosophy, principles and practices of inclusive education for diverse learners

*Education systems in society today must be able to cater for a diverse range of learners with various characteristics whilst still maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment for all children. This is better known as inclusive education which can be described as an approach of including and supporting children with a disability or difference in all schools and communities. It is imperative that these children are made to feel welcomed and are nurtured and educated in the same manner as children without a disability or difference. These diverse learners include children who require adapted teaching methods or curriculum, children who require additional materials or personnel resources and children who require understanding (Sargeant, 2012). To give a few examples this may include children with a disability, children from ethnic minority groups, gifted children or children from the street. How this inclusive approach to education is implemented is reflected by the international principles of social justice, national and state legislation, individual school approaches to an inclusive environment and of course actual classroom teaching and strategies.*

## Global Level

When considering inclusive education for diverse learners and how to best maintain a safe and supportive learning environment for these children it is vital to understand how the topic is derived at a global level. In order to develop an understanding of the principles of inclusion in an educational context at an international and national level, the relevant legislation, policies and provisions must be investigated which highlight the factors that contribute to educational inclusion. This is for the reason that including children with a disability in regular classrooms is something that international parties have agreed upon and Australian legislation openly supports (Shaddock, Giorcelli & Smith, 2007). The rights of children and adults alike can be seen as falling into three broad areas, which include moral rights, legal rights and human rights, and may overlap each other when relating various privileges (Hyde, 2010).

The first category of moral rights reflects the basic ethical values that different cultural communities accept when maintaining an inclusive learning environment (Hyde, 2010). This change can be highlighted in Woolfolk and Margetts (2010) statement that “Prior to 1981, people with a disability were often segregated from the community and had little choice about where they lived or what they did.” (p. 149). This means that 1981, the international year of disabled persons, marked the beginning of the development of ethical rights for children with a disability being able to maintain the same rights to choice and lifestyle opportunities as those who do not have a disability (Foreman, as cited by Woolfolk and Margetts, 2010). This principle is an essential guide to teaching students with disabilities and ensuring they are given equal opportunities to learn in any classroom.

The events in 1981 then overlap into another area of the three categories which focuses on human rights. This category predominately reflects the global level of basic consensus and treaties between different countries through international conventions and law (Hyde, 2010). At this global level the main international legal rights to take into consideration are those included within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a child in 1989. This is when the full range of human rights that children everywhere should be subjected to were incorporated into the first legally binding international document (Unicef). There are fifty-four articles within this document that all provide strong statements and evidence towards equal and inclusive rights for children however, there are some specific points which are worthwhile to mention. Article 29 of this document highlights the global aims for education are to foster respect amongst oneself and others in terms of cultural identity, language and values, (Sargeant, 2012). This reflects various characteristics of diversity that are seen in society today such as different faith systems and heritage. Another important feature of this document is article 23 which sets out a clear notion that in order to assist a child with a disability in maximising their success and achievement in future endeavours they have the right to special care, education and training (Sargeant, 2012). All international countries that sign this agreement have an obligation to respect and fulfil these principles in order to protect children from all forms of discrimination throughout their education (Hyde, 2010).

Continuing on from this major event saw the introduction of a new document, the Salamanca Statement, in 1994 from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. This newly released policy ridded exclusion in schools and encouraged governments to adopt a new inclusive education policy which maintained all students should have the option to enrol in regular schools (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). As a result of the Salamanca Statement and the introduction of the new principle of inclusion, a new global agenda for special education was formed and took on a ‘schools for all’ approach (Moss, 2003). For schools, this meant that all children should be accommodated for within every education system, regardless of any personal characteristics such as physical, intellectual, social, emotional or linguistic conditions (Seymour, 2001).

Lastly it is important to consider the third area of the three categories which focuses on legal rights and includes all enforceable domestic laws and legislation (Hyde, 2010). This is where all the countries included in the international treaty form their own national legislations which reflect the obligations in the United Nation documents. In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 was introduced to ensure all children with disabilities have access to educational services (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). In order to guarantee that educational practices were complying with the provisions within the disability discrimination act a specific legislation, the Disability Standards for Education 2005, was created for the educational domain (Conway, 2010). Furthermore, this lead to the Queensland Inclusive Education statement in 2005 which clearly outlined that all schools should be a supportive and engaging environment for all students, staff and caregivers (Education Queensland, 2005). This statement is particularly important in noting that all students should understand and appreciate diversity, that the community should challenge social injustice and the school should reduce all barriers to learning (Education Queensland, 2005).

## School Level

In a similar way that each nation and state may form an adaption of the obligations seen in the United Nations convention treaty, each school may adopt an inclusive stance to education in a unique way. In order for an inclusive school to be initially created it is generally reflected by the community the school exists within (Hyde, 2010). This is for the main reason that every community is different and is made up of unique staff, families and students that have their own customs and values. As a result of this the school develops traditions, mission statements and goals that reflect the community that the school exists within as they attempt to educate and implement their policies, practices and curriculum in an inclusive manner (Hyde, 2010). Stainback and Stainback (as cited in Hyde, 2010) maintain that an inclusive school is “a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, and supports and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met.” (p. 313). This statement is vital to remember when seeking ways to teach students with diverse characteristics and make them, as well as their families, feel comfortable in the whole school environment. If the community as a whole works together in a meaningful manner to follow the school’s mission statement then inclusion will be supported a greater level which will create positive attitudes and outcomes for everyone (Conway, 2010).

One approach to equity in schools can be acknowledged as not merely treating all students the same but to remove all barriers in the lives of children that prevent them from reaching their maximum potential (Keddie, 2011). This can be achieved through a whole school approach towards inclusive education being implemented in schools and being encouraged by the government and the school principal. In Australia, research suggests that in order to have an effective change in education in terms of inclusive policies and procedures, a whole school approach should be implemented which raises awareness about exclusionary pressures (Bourke, 2009). This process will then foster participation from the not only all students but also the whole school community through engaging key personnel, such as teachers, parents, guardians, teacher-aids and specialist teachers, in the learning and changing process (Bourke, 2009). A whole school approach will then lead to the whole community being aware of diversity and able to value, celebrate and respond to differences in a positive manner (Education Queensland, 2005). Whole school programmes should see changes in the approach to organisation of students, models of support, roles and responsibilities of school staff as well as approaches to learning and teaching in order to reflect the individual traits of the community the school is a part of (Bourke, 2009).An example of a whole school approach is the ILFE (Inclusive, learner-friendly environment) model developed by UNESCO. This model helps schools focus on globally shared values and visions such as including all children, promoting participation, cooperation, collaboration and opportunities in a safe and culturally sensitive school and making learning relevant whilst still including families and communities in the process (Churchill, Ferguson, Godinho, Johnson, Keddie, Letts, Mackay, McGill, Moss, Nagel, Nicholson & Vick, 2010).

When considering how to best engage the key personnel within a school community, schools often struggle with the issue of funding that may or may not come with a student with a diverse characteristic. Schools that have students that fall into the categories of having an intellectual disability, sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, Autism Spectrum disorder as well as severe emotional behavioural problems are able to access government funds to assist in creating an inclusive environment (Conway, 2010). Funding often results in key personnel, such as teacher aides, being employed by the school to assist and support the students with a disability or learning difficulty (Bourke, 2009). Without funding, schools may wish to ask for parent volunteers at particular times of a school day to assist in certain learning activities. This will create a strong bond and partnership between the school and parents which will assist in making inclusion the responsibility of everyone in the community (Conway, 2010).

## Classroom Level

Keeping in mind the school mission statements, policies and curriculum objectives that are developed within creating a whole school approach to inclusive education, the role of the classroom teacher then becomes a central factor to consider. This is when it becomes imperative to recognise that there is not one method or approach to inclusion that will support any two classrooms alike. Creating an inclusive classroom requires “insight, personal and cultural sensitivity, awareness and openness to adapting the classroom environment, student tasks and pedagogy to the needs of individual students.”(Churchill et al., 2010, p. 293). This is for the reason that just as all schools are different, so are individual classrooms. Classrooms are also the place where it becomes important to ensure that the children with a disability or difference are not merely being integrated into the classroom and given different activities based on their achievement level but are placed in a classroom that is adapting to their needs.

Expanding on the idea of the ILFE model mentioned earlier, when planning for classroom teaching it is important to be sensitive to cultural issues and still recognise the obligations within the whole school approach. A teaching strategy called the 4B model assists teachers in this matter through reminding them of four key areas to consider in planning inclusive learning experiences (Daniels as cited in Churchill et al., 2010). These include avoiding being biased towards any type of difference in lessons, being able to judge what issues in society to include in your teaching through examining which have malicious content and those that do not, ensuring that your overall planning embraces the needs of all students through seeking balance as well as thinking broadly about alternative policies and practices (Churchill et al., 2010).

Lastly it is important to plan learning activities that challenge and motivate students by tapping into their interests and curiosities. If teachers get to know individual students and their personalities they will have a better chance at determining what the key is to motivating each student as it will vary between different children (Churchill et al., 2010). The next step after discovering what motivates the child is to discuss their individual goals that they would like to achieve in different learning areas, as opposed to you as the teacher grouping them based on ability. For example, in physical education children can set their own goal of how many laps of the oval they are able to walk, this then allows children with a physical disability to still complete the activity and be a part of the class but at a level that is comfortable and appropriate for them. This could be transferred to a child with an intellectual disability and a goal for social interactions or a child from a family who speaks a different language and a goal they have for English lessons.

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