Better Together: Inclusive Education in the Early Years

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter unpacks the concept of inclusive education and explores the implications of inclusion for the early years.

Learning goals for this chapter include:

› Considering the process of stigmatisation and the implications for exclusion;
› Developing an understanding of inclusion, including recognising misunderstandings of inclusion and why they are problematic;
› Identifying the history of inclusive education;
› Recognising macro- and micro-exclusion;
› Developing an understanding of key issues to consider when approaching inclusive early years education.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

agency
courtesy stigma
everal years
everal years professional
enacted stigma
felt stigma
inclusive education
integration
macro- and micro-exclusion in education
mainstreaming
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Introduction

As Freire (1970) argued, education is never neutral—it is a political act that is informed by individual and collective values. Inclusive education involves embracing human diversity and valuing and supporting the belonging and full participation of all people together (Cologon, 2013a). This includes upholding the rights of all children and providing education free from discriminatory beliefs and attitudes. To do this requires developing and putting into action inclusive values, policies and practices. This follows the call from writers, such as Freire (1970) and Dewey (1916), to engage in education for social justice and democracy, with a focus on reducing or removing oppression within and beyond education experiences and systems.

Every great early years professional is inclusive. As Nutbrown and Clough (2009, p.192) argue, ‘respectful educators will include all children’. However, inclusion is frequently misunderstood, and many early years professionals are unsure about what being inclusive involves. Throughout this book, the notion of inclusion will be explored with particular attention to what it means for everyday practice in early years settings.

As will be discussed later in the chapter, research provides evidence that inclusive education is better for everyone. Education outcomes are more positive and children learn and grow in ways that do not occur when they are segregated. Early years professionals are more flexible, skilled, confident and competent when they are inclusive. Inclusive early years education has the potential for positive social change—even transformation. However, inclusion is a complex and ongoing process, thus it takes time and commitment to develop a clear understanding of inclusion and to implement this in practice. Ongoing critical reflection, through a process of examining views and practices, is vital in engaging with inclusion—and a key responsibility of every early years professional.

Early years professionals play a powerful role in bringing about genuine inclusion. This book is intended to support early years professionals and researchers as they develop confidence and understanding and undertake the ongoing journey of becoming inclusive.

Bringing about inclusive education requires an ongoing commitment to removing barriers to the valued full participation and belonging of all children (Connor & Goldmansour, 2012; Curcic, 2009; Frankel, Gold & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010; Theodorou & Nind, 2010; Vakil, Welton, O’Connor & Kline, 2009). Inclusion is not the domain of charitable ‘do-gooders’, but rather an essential component of a functioning society. Inclusion is not about granting ‘special favours’, nor about changing someone to fit the elusive ‘norm’ so they can be ‘granted access’ to the community. Rather, it is about acknowledging our shared
humanity and moving beyond false notions of entitlement to recognise that for any of us to flourish as members of society, we need to be included. As Prosser and Loxley (2007, p.57) write, inclusion ‘is a philosophy of acceptance and about providing a framework within which all children, regardless of ability, gender, language or cultural origin, can be valued equally with respect and provided with equal opportunities’.

Inclusion is a rights-based approach, and as such creates an opportunity to progress beyond a charity perspective, towards social justice. Cultural and educational transformation is needed to fight against discrimination and prejudice in all its forms (Armstrong & Barton, 2008). Inclusive education is a process that occurs within the everyday moments in any education setting and, as noted above, requires ongoing commitment and reflection on the part of early years professionals.

Barriers to inclusion

One question that arises in relation to inclusion is inclusion of whom and in what? In addressing this question it is important to reflect on underlying philosophies evident in education policy and practice. Embracing our shared humanity requires going beyond a ‘them’ and ‘us’—beyond the idea that there is one ‘desirable’ group into which all ‘others’ should be included—to instead recognise and acknowledge that people are all equally human: we are all ‘us’. Perhaps surprisingly, social realities suggest that this is harder than it seems.

STIGMA AND DEHUMANISATION

It is unlikely that anyone would set out intentionally to dehumanise people. However, racism, sexism, genderism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism (see Chapter 2) and ageism all, at their core, involve a process of dehumanisation. Consequently, to work towards inclusion, it is necessary to understand the dehumanising process of exclusion.

Dehumanisation occurs when we make people ‘other’ to ourselves—that process of creating a ‘them’ and ‘us’ in which ‘us’ is viewed as more desirable or ‘better’. This then forms the justification for discrimination. For example, racial segregation in the past was justified on the basis that it was better for the ‘them’ (the oppressed), while simultaneously maintaining the superiority of the ‘us’ (the oppressors). Similarly, segregation based on impairment or ‘disability’ in Australia (and elsewhere) today often stems from the belief that it is better for ‘them’.

Dehumanisation, which is often subconscious, unintentional and enculturated, occurs through a process of stigmatisation. In his classic book...
exploring this notion, Erving Goffman defined stigma as ‘the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance’ (Goffman, 1963, p.9). Goffman outlined the dehumanising process of stigmatisation and the justification that stigma provides for discrimination, explaining that stigma is ‘an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated … By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his [or her] life chances’ (Goffman, 1963, p.15).

Consider for a moment one of the most stigmatised groups in Australia at present: asylum seekers. By the process of stigmatisation, asylum seekers have become dehumanised—viewed by many as less than human—and thus even extreme discrimination has been justified (see Chapter 15).

Goffman (1963) identified three different aspects or experiences of stigma: enacted, felt and courtesy stigma.

**Enacted stigma** is the most blatant form of stigma and involves active discrimination. For example, discrimination in enrolment processes to prevent a stigmatised person from attending or participating in an education setting would be considered enacted stigma (Lilley, 2013).

**Felt stigma** involves awareness and fear of stigma and feelings of shame due to being stigmatised. The notion of felt stigma relates to ‘stigma consciousness’ or ‘stereotype threat’. Felt stigma can involve the playing out of the effects of stigma on account of these fears. For example, Link and Phelan (2001) in research in North America found that African–American students had lower test scores when told that they were being tested for intelligence compared with when given the same test but told it was for another purpose.

**Courtesy stigma** involves the feeling of stigma by those around a stigmatised person. For example, a family of a person who experiences disability, or the family of a person who identifies as homosexual in a highly conservative community, may experience courtesy stigma.Courtesy stigma may result in strong advocacy against discrimination or, by contrast, in trying to cover up ‘difference’ or encourage the stigmatised person to ‘pass’ for ‘normal’ in order to avoid stigma. Tongue shortening operations and plastic surgery for children who have Down syndrome (Goeke, 2003) are an example of courtesy stigma.

Experiencing disability (disablement), a socially constructed and imposed social process (as explored in Chapter 2), is, in itself, a process of stigmatisation. As Shapiro (1993, p.30) writes, people who experience disability are constantly described or represented as ‘either an object of pity or a source of inspiration. These images are internalized … build social stereotypes, create artificial limitations, and contribute to discrimination and minority status’.
Building on Goffman’s seminal work, Link and Phelan (2001, p.367) argue that the following process is involved in the playing out of stigma:

1. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences;
2. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes;
3. In the third, labelled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them’;
4. In the fourth, labelled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes;
5. Finally, stigmatisation is entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of ‘differentness’, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination.

As Link and Phelan (2001, p.375) note, ‘it takes power to stigmatize … However, the role of power in stigma is frequently overlooked because in many instances power differences are so taken for granted as to seem unproblematic’.

The structures, systems and processes of early years education and care are one such source of power. They hold the potential for the production of stigma, or by contrast—if there is critical engagement with the notion of stigma and a rejection of dehumanisation—for inclusion. Stigma is the basis of segregation and exclusion. Inclusion, on the other hand, is free of stigma. Early years professionals thus need to consider stigma and the process of dehumanisation in their everyday practices.

CRITICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever experienced stigmatisation? If you have, what did this feel like? How did you respond? What might it be like to experience this every day?
2. Consider the power early years professionals might hold. Could this power lead to stigmatisation or dehumanisation of children? How might this be addressed in everyday practice?

MISUNDERSTANDING INCLUSION

One common barrier to inclusion is the misunderstanding of inclusion as assimilation—the idea that people can only be included if they can be ‘the same enough’, or learn to ‘fit’ within existing structures and systems. In effect, this is a belief that people can be included if they can alter or hide their characteristics that are linked to stigma, and ‘pass’ for ‘normal’.

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In regards to early years settings, this idea leads to an emphasis on changing the child (who is being ‘included’) to ‘fit’ within a setting, rather than on changing the setting to include the child (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Curcic, 2009; Lalvani, 2013; Rietveld, 2010). When inclusion is understood as assimilation, a stigmatised child carries a perpetual ‘question mark’ over his/her right to be ‘included’ (Bridle, 2005; Cologon, 2013b). Rietveld (2010) describes this dehumanising approach as a demeaning understanding of inclusion, in contrast to a facilitative understanding of inclusion in which all children are valued and recognised as rights-holders and equal human beings.

Another misunderstanding of inclusive education occurs when it is viewed as a ‘special effort’ or ‘added (optional) extra’ born out of ‘charity’, or ‘kindness’. This stigmatisation is perhaps more subtle, but the patronising creation of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ is clear.

Common to these misunderstandings is the underlying idea that inclusive education gives children permission to be present, rather than valuing the participation of all children and ensuring all children belong. In addition to the negative impact this has on the child and family, this attitude also disempowers early years professionals to a point where they may feel they have little to offer the child. By contrast, as explored throughout this book, early years professionals have a critical role to play in adapting the environment and making changes to teaching approaches and materials in order to include every child, rather than seeking to change them (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Biklen, 2000; Cologon, 2010, 2013a). An important question to consider is how these misunderstandings of inclusion developed and how barriers to inclusion can be broken down.

The journey towards inclusion

‘Inclusive education’ is one of the most contested terms in education (Graham & Slee, 2008) and is a contentious issue (Barton, 1997). Understandings of inclusive education have changed over time, with the gradual move from extreme levels of segregation towards greater inclusion.

EXCLUSION AND SEGREGATION

Macro-exclusion involves the dehumanising process of stigmatisation as a ‘lesser’ or ‘inferior’ person, which is then played out in the form of exclusion from education. At its most extreme, this means a child is not provided...
with access to any formal education opportunities. Segregation is a form of macro-exclusion that involves the provision of formal education, but within separate settings or activities. This exclusion occurs when a child is barred from a setting, for example on the basis of impairment, or when a child is excluded from particular activities or experiences within a setting. For example, in the past, the exclusion of ‘black children’ from ‘white schools’ in the United States, or in Australia until 1972, the exclusion of Aboriginal children from schools if parents of non-Aboriginal children objected to their attendance (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2001). In addition to segregated settings, segregation may occur within general education settings, for example, a ‘special’ class. As Connor and Goldmansour write, ‘with segregation comes devaluation, a loss in cultural capital for individuals. This form of disempowerment actively disadvantages students’ (Connor & Goldmansour, 2012, p.31).

When asked about the sensory overstimulation present in everyday classrooms as an argument for segregated education, Jamie Burke—a man labelled with autism—shared that in his experience of education, ‘segregation equals a distinction of lesser ability’ (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p.172). He goes on to ask: ‘Am I lesser because I get nervous about an exam? Am I deemed less intelligent because my feelings only make passing a higher stakes? I again ask you to think of who is it that has placed this way of evaluating worthiness? Have they placed their feet in my shoes? I would enjoin them to try’ (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p.172).

MAINSTREAMING

In the 1960s, strong criticisms of segregated education began to emerge. Questions were raised regarding whether ‘special’ schools had positive or negative outcomes. Consequently, mainstreaming, where all children are educated within the same setting, became more common. This led to research, including meta-analyses, identifying no benefits of segregated education compared with education of all children together (Calberg & Kavale, 1980; Dunn, 1968; Wang & Baker, 1985).

While it is a rejection of extreme segregation and exclusion, mainstreaming is based on the understanding that all children can and should assimilate to ‘fit’ the existing setting, rather than that education approaches and environments should be developed to include children. Mainstreaming involves attendance, but not inclusion. It is now widely recognised that ‘being there is not enough; it is no guarantee of respect for difference or access to the material, social, cultural and educational capital that people expect’ (Komesaroff & McLean, 2006, p.97).
Note

It is important to distinguish between the terms ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘mainstream’. Settings intended for the ‘general population’, be that a childcare centre, school, library, swimming pool or any other setting or activity, are often referred to as ‘mainstream settings’. For example, a ‘mainstream school’ would be one that is not targeted at a specific minority group, but rather all children of school age in that locality. As a result, people sometimes talk of inclusion within a ‘mainstream’ school or centre (as opposed to mainstreaming).

INTEGRATION

In an effort to address the many issues with mainstreaming, in the 1970s, the increasing focus within policy and practice in Australia (and elsewhere) became integration (Doneau, 1984). Integration involves making adaptations or accommodations to enable participation within a mainstream experience or setting.

Many education settings incorporate segregated ‘special’ classes or units in which children labelled ‘disabled’ or ‘disordered’ are educated. Many of these units have a segregated, fenced off, playground. Children who attend these segregated settings are often integrated into some whole-setting activities. In school settings, for example, the whole school may come together for school assemblies, music or some sport activities. Individual children may also attend part of the day in a mainstream class with age-matched peers. Some children will also join together during outside playtime. Children who attend ‘special’ settings (for example, ‘special’ schools) may be integrated for a day or more per week at a mainstream setting.

While the focus on accommodations is critical, integration has been criticised for being tokenistic. Many children who are integrated actually spend little time participating in the centre or school community and most of their time in segregated activities, classes or settings. A major criticism of integration is the implication that someone who is ‘different’ needs to be ‘fitted in’, rather than working to include, value and meet the needs of all children within the setting. In this sense, integration is often little more than moving ‘special’ education from a segregated setting into a mainstream one—the perpetuation of exclusionary practices in the guise of integration. Armstrong and Barton (2008, p.10) argue that ‘integration makes no requirement for the school to effect radical change in its culture and organisation because the expectation is that the child is accommodated to existing structures and practices or—at best, if organisational and pedagogical adjustments are implemented, they take place around the individual child or group of children identified as in need’.
Note
This notion of integration is different to the notion of ‘an integrated unit of work’, which involves integrating different subject areas within one experience, activity or lesson; for example, an experience that is focused simultaneously on teaching literacy, science and mathematics.

Micro-exclusion
Due to the lack of understanding of inclusive education, exclusion and segregation often occur in the name of inclusion. Segregation can occur socially within so-called ‘inclusive’ settings when children are not given the opportunity to participate, learn and grow together. Like for integration, this can involve moving ‘special’ education from a segregated setting into a mainstream setting, but without any genuine efforts to bring about inclusion. Children therefore remain segregated and excluded within a so-called inclusive setting. This is what D’Alessio (2011) has termed ‘micro-exclusion’. For example this is evident when a child attends a general education setting, but is excluded from the activities of the rest of the children, as illustrated by McLeskey and Waldron:

The general education teacher had just completed taking roll and handling the daily chores that are necessary to start the day. As reading was beginning, the special education teacher entered the classroom. She went to a table in the back of the room, and four students with disabilities joined her. The general education teacher gathered the remaining 20 students in the front of the room. The special education teacher began working on a phonics lesson with ‘her’ students, while the general education teacher was discussing a book she had been reading to the rest of the class for the past week (2007, p.162).

Micro-exclusion occurs when adaptations or accommodations to the environment, curriculum or pedagogy that are required to include a child are not made (for example, refusing to install a handrail in the toilets) (Purdue, Ballard & MacArthur, 2001). Or, it might occur where a child is only permitted to attend a setting under certain conditions (for example, only when a parent or assistant is present, or only for part of the day) (Purdue et al., 2001). Inclusive education, on the other hand, is ‘a way of looking at the world that enacts the fundamental meaning of education for all children: full participation, full membership, valued citizenship’ (Kliewer, 1998, p.320).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
In response to criticisms of integration, alongside greater recognition of the human rights of all children in legislation and policy (see Chapter 4), there has been a growing move towards inclusive education. Beyond mainstreaming and integration, inclusive education involves ensuring the valued full participation...
and belonging of all children within any given education setting. Inclusive education involves both social and academic inclusion, free from discrimination in any form.

The term ‘inclusion’ often brings to mind minority groups and people who experience disability in particular, but in reality, inclusion is about everyone (Armstrong & Barton, 2008). However, people from minority groups are often excluded and thus particular emphasis is placed on inclusion to address this issue.

Petriwskyj (2010a) argues that understandings of inclusion reflect beliefs about diversity in any given context. Graham and Spandagou (2011, p.225) found that ‘[t]he contextual characteristics of a school and its community inform discussions of diversity and define what inclusive education means in specific schools’. Consequently, greater diversity in a school results in a broader understanding of inclusive education (Graham & Spandagou, 2011).

People who experience disability are the largest minority group in the world today (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011) and are among the most marginalised and excluded people in Australia and throughout the world (Hobson, 2010; United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2013). Therefore, while this book focuses on inclusion of all, particular emphasis is placed on inclusion of children labelled ‘disabled’. However, as one teacher in some of my research argues, ‘Inclusion is really (when you think about it) what teaching is: Meet each child where they are at, build on their strengths and interests to move them along, and adapt your teaching style, resources and pace to each of them. Thus it puzzles me when words such as “disability”/“special needs” throw people off’ (Cologon, 2010, p.47).

**FIGURE 1.1 DIVERSITY**

Artwork by Kaitlyn
Confusion between inclusion and integration/mainstreaming

Confusion sometimes occurs between the terms ‘integration’/’mainstreaming’ and ‘inclusion’. Foreman (2011, p.16) argues that integration and mainstreaming involve asking ‘Can we provide for the needs of this student?’, while inclusion involves asking ‘How will we provide for the needs of this student?’ The difference between these concepts is important to reflect upon and is illustrated in Figures 1.4 and 1.5.

FIGURE 1.2 INTEGRATION

[From ‘One of the Kids’, published by the Disability Council of NSW, written by Wendy Stroeve and illustrated by Kerry Millard, reproduced with permission.]

FIGURE 1.3 INCLUSION

[From ‘One of the Kids’, published by the Disability Council of NSW, written by Wendy Stroeve and illustrated by Kerry Millard, reproduced with permission.]

Why is inclusion important?

Though Foreman’s question ‘How will we provide for the needs of this student?’ seems a simple one, inclusive education is not always easy to implement (Barton, 2008). So, why would early years professionals commit to bringing about inclusion in reality?

Montaigne, an influential sixteenth-century French philosopher, wrote extensively on the question of ‘how should we live?’. Writing of his many and