











The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a binding Convention and requires signatories, including Australia, to adopt legislation, policy and practice to support the inclusion of persons with a disability in all aspects of life. In so far as education is concerned, it mandates that regular or local schools should be the *expected* experience for all children. The Convention adopts a model of disability that is not only about academic participation, but is socially constructed, with a focus on removing barriers at all levels.



## STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

### Inclusion

The pre-service teacher notices the class has many more boys than girls. There are twenty-eight children in the class: nineteen boys and nine girls. The room is very small for so many children to move around in without touching or bumping into other students.

The teacher asks all students to get a chair and bring it so they can sit in a circle in the centre of the classroom. One girl, Mary, stops another girl, Sarah, from putting her chair in the space next to her. Mary kicks the chair away so Sarah can't sit there. Then a boy, Simon, sitting in the next chair, gets involved as well and starts pushing the chair back with his foot. The smaller girl, Sarah, becomes upset, takes her chair and moves across the circle to another space. The boy also takes his chair and moves to another space in the circle. The children appear to be carefully considering who they are comfortable sitting next to for this learning activity.

The circle of students on the chairs settles down, although a few of the boys are talking in glowing terms about the excursion they had yesterday. All students are given a card with pictures, colours and a number on it. The students are then instructed to change places so that they are sitting in numeric order according to the numbers on the cards they held. The students all do this quietly and settle into the circle with all students randomly distributed around the circle. The teacher now asks them each to talk about the best aspects of the excursion they had the day before to a science discovery centre.

Read the 'Stories from the classroom' feature and consider the following questions relating to inclusion.

- 1 Was Mary acting inclusively in this scenario?
- 2 Why do you think the teacher made the students sit in a circle?
- 3 Why did she make the students sit in random places in the circle?  
Think about what inclusion means for all the students in such a learning situation.
- 1 Have you ever felt excluded from a social group? How did it make you feel to be excluded?
- 2 What did you do to try to be included, if anything? On reflection, is there something else you could have done to try to be included?
- 3 What else could the teacher have done before, during or after the activity?
- 4 What might the teacher do next time?

Pause  
and  
reflect

## Some theory and a framework

Inclusion is both a term and a process that is relative in its interpretations and applications in respect to the various historical, cultural and pedagogical traditions; social structures, medical services and resource availability; and political, legal and policy frameworks and economic priorities that a country embodies or that an education system or school operates within at any point in time (Hyde 2009; Hyde, Ohna & Hjulstad 2006).

Inclusion is typically seen as both a process of *access*, with related considerations of the conditions for access towards the *participation* of all students, and as a process of *change* in terms of the legislation, policy and educational practices that are developed, and formation of positive attitudes among participants (Skritic 1995). Inclusion, then, is a concept that is essentially based in the philosophical and pedagogical traditions that we embrace and the international and national imperatives to which we are committed and which as a society we attempt to implement.

In the educational systems that a country provides, inclusion may be perceived as a cycle between *differentiation* and *uniformity* (Vislie 2003; Wagner 1994).

The most *differentiated* education systems provide a high degree of specialisation of services and associated funding adapted to the needs of individuals and groups. Responsibility for curriculum planning and delivery is often devolved to local schools or regions, and often there is a high degree of individualisation in planning and choice among school programs and support services. The focus is highly learner-centred and on the needs of all and excellence of outcomes. Reforms of highly differentiated service systems usually involve an increase in the degree of centralisation—through legislation, policy, national curriculum, funding or evaluation—to establish greater central control, or to ensure that available resources are distributed as equitably as possible and that desired outcomes are achieved, often within diminishing budgets. This aspect of budgets is an important one that can significantly influence how far governments go in attempting to meet the needs of individuals with a difference or disability. It is, in essence, a political issue that can limit the outcomes of effective policy directed towards optimal inclusion of students in education.

The most *uniform* education systems are recognised by a high level of central control of legislation, policy, funding, teacher standards and other guidelines for practice, central curriculum policy (for example, national curriculum content and standards), national testing of students, teacher and school performance and the maintenance of established pedagogic traditions. There is often a high emphasis on ‘completing the curriculum’. Reforms to these uniform systems usually involve greater decentralisation of some elements to allow for a degree of local region or school variation in curriculum implementation, funding and pedagogy (Vislie 2003). Assumptions that all schools start at the same point may be questioned and greater discretion may be allocated to school systems, schools and teachers in implementing national policy and curriculum objectives and measuring school outcomes.

In practice, there is a dynamic, cyclical process, with national and local systems of education moving between the two extremes of uniformity and differentiation depending on changing political, social, cultural or economic factors and influences. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a case in point, with its emphasis on uniformity in legislation and policy, but differentiation at national and local levels to the needs of individuals within the societies and communities of the signatories to the Convention.

Movement away from differentiation and towards the uniform end of the cycle may be currently observed in Australia, with high levels of relevance being given to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership; AITSL) and the use of National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) student and school data in political and system decisions about schools and their performance and funding.

Therefore, there is no one fully effective definition or model of inclusion, because in each national or school system ‘inclusion’ may be viewed somewhat differently for good reasons. Differentiation allows the needs of each student to be considered or taken into account; for example, students with a specific learning need. Uniformity allows for the rights, participation and equity of all students. Both can therefore be at some level inclusive or exclusive: in their policy and practice, and in following legislative and policy controls and pedagogical traditions. There may be no utopian ‘school for all’ possible, as in each form of system there will always be some aspects of exclusion, for some groups or individuals, wherever there is inclusion. The individuals or groups included or excluded can change as the rules, structures, attitudes and budgets change within the cycle between uniformity and differentiation. We see this in Australia in current considerations of people with a mental health condition or in the rights of children of asylum seekers as major issues in society, as well as in education. Levels of inclusion and exclusion depend on our priorities and values at any point in time, and the balance we reach between uniformity and differentiation may change.

Within this broad theoretical framework it is possible to describe or locate various countries and education authorities in respect to their current policies, positions and practices. By their histories, traditions, economic priorities, legal provisions, and social and cultural policies, we may see where they currently place themselves, and where their values and professional and social tensions may lie in the provision of education services and the directions of reform of those services. Mitchell (2005) suggests that there are three conclusions that can be reached about inclusive education:

- 1 that inclusive education is seen by most as creating a single system designed to serve the needs of all students
- 2 that inclusive education is still often based on both socio-political models and psycho-medical models
- 3 that while many countries appear highly committed to inclusive education, their practices often fall short of their rhetoric and policies.

So even when inclusion is strongly supported by international, national or state policy—or even legislation, as it appears to be in Australia—there is concern that the observable practices or outcomes in schools can remain substantially unchanged or experience significant delays or difficulties in their implementation. As Sowell (1995) observes, policy issues can become ideological debates that present conflicting visions or the ‘visions of the anointed’ (p. 241). Such ‘anointed’ visions, especially those that espouse ‘full’ inclusion on only moral and rights principles, can prevail over other issues in determining policy. Each school and every classroom plays its part if the real outcomes of inclusive education policy are to be realised. There are now very few specialist teacher education programs available in Australia to prepare special education teachers and advisors, and this places the responsibility for responding to student diversity clearly in the domain of the regular school and classroom for all learners. This is



reflected in the AITSL Standards for all graduate teachers (see [www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list)).

We also warn against thinking that inclusion is only a ‘group’ thing (for example, about ‘students with autism’) or an ‘academic’ thing (for example, about achievement within the curriculum). Inclusion is more an individual experience than a group experience, and is as much related to an individual’s social participation, access to quality education and an enduring sense of well-being and school belonging as it is to levels of academic achievement, specific competencies or school placement considerations. While considerations about the rights and needs of groups—for example, of children with an attention, linguistic, gender or behavioural difference—are important, the most relevant considerations often lie with the situation of the individual, as it is at that level where real outcomes and a ‘sense’ of inclusion are experienced.

The components of an inclusive education are *access*, *participation* and *equitable outcomes*. Access ensures that students with a disability or difference can take part in the general education system. However, of itself this can be a recipe for failure unless those systems and schools adapt and change to enable the students to participate towards achieving equitable outcomes academically and socially. Is this the end of the story then? How do we know that they have achieved equitable outcomes?

This last question is crucial. What forms of engagement with social and academic events and activities did students experience and how effectively did the adaptations and supports work? What else could be done? To achieve equity of outcomes we need to carefully plan and evaluate the types of learning engagements that these students have. It does not happen by the students just ‘being there’ or by teachers simply going through the procedural steps defined by policy.

In this context, a new term of **engagement** has been introduced (Cooper, Jacobs & Busher 2011). Engagement is compatible with the broadest descriptions of inclusive education, but is concerned with the degree to which the student is ‘attached’ or ‘belongs’ emotionally, socially, cognitively and academically to the school. The focus is more evaluative about how the school and the teachers are able to accommodate to the student’s needs, the relationships developed and how effective the initiatives taken and supports provided are ultimately judged to be. Schools may support building a sense of belonging by encouraging strong relationships between staff, students and parents and providing opportunities for students to participate in school activities (Prince & Hadwin 2013). Other studies state that ethnic minority students’ school engagement is influenced by their feelings, daily experiences and interpersonal interactions that may enhance their participation, recognition and commonalities among their peers (Dusi & Steinbach 2015; Gummadam, Pitman & Ioffe 2016). In other words, it is all about the perceptions and experiences of the students, not about our judgments regarding the nature of our policies and support systems themselves.

So, while ‘participation’ in education goes beyond ‘access’, ‘engagement’ goes beyond ‘participation’ and asks the leading question: *participation in what and with which outcomes?* The process can involve measures of the student’s engagement academically, communicatively, cognitively or socially, to promote more active engagement by the student with what is learnt and what is taught in schools.

Inclusive education is, therefore, a process of responding to the uniqueness of individuals, increasing their sense of presence, access, participation and engagement in a learning society and, in the case of this discussion, in schools.

**Engagement:** Can be generally seen as student participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of potentially measurable outcomes.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has introduced the principles behind inclusion, particularly those influencing educational contexts. It also examined the factors—international, national, humanitarian and social—that contribute to the acceptance and implementation of legislation, policy and practice towards educational inclusion and the monitoring and evaluation of students' engagement. Finally, the chapter has provided a model of inclusion that may be used to critically reflect on school systems and school policies and procedures.

### For group discussion

Where does your school or education system lie in relation to the inclusion of students with diverse backgrounds or needs? Based on your experience, discuss with your classmates an individual, or even a small group, of interest, of whom you are aware. Reflect on the access, participation and engagement they experience in a school and the equity of their outcomes in:

- 1 educational terms
- 2 social terms
- 3 personal terms
- 4 overall engagement and a sense of school belonging.

## Key references

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## Websites

**AITSL Standards**—[www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list)

This resource provides a comprehensive and detailed listing of teacher competencies across a range of curricula and specialised teaching settings.

**UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**—[www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)

This site and its many associated manuscripts describe the relevance of this Convention and the obligations that apply to all signatory nation states to act and respond.

**UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**—[www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml)

Has similar resources to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child website.