

# Understanding Diversity, Inclusion and Engagement

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To begin to develop an understanding of the principles behind inclusion, particularly in educational contexts
- To begin to develop an understanding of the factors—international, national, humanitarian and social—that contribute to the formation and implementation of legislation, policy and practice towards educational inclusion and engagement
- To be able to reflect these understandings in initial discussions and analysis of cases and situations where the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds or with specific needs is considered

## KEY TERMS

engagement  
equity  
inclusion

integration  
mainstreaming

## Introduction

According to 2015 ABS data, 28.2 per cent of the Australian population was born overseas, with the highest percentage of immigrants born in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, followed by India and China. Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations on earth and about 23 per cent of Australians speak another language other than English at home (ABS 2015). This extensive cultural and linguistic diversity within the Australian population is now reflected in our schools and their communities. Other characteristics of diversity reflected in our schools are the greater access and participation of students of Indigenous heritage, students from different faith systems, and students with impairments, disabilities or disadvantages that influence their development of communicative competence, social competence, cognitive ability, or literacy and numeracy. Australia has committed to a range of legislative instruments at state, national and international levels that promote inclusion of all citizens, while prohibiting forms of discrimination. All states and territories have enacted such legislation, which is reflected in overarching Commonwealth legislation. While the social

and academic inclusion of individuals and groups in our schools is often taken for granted, this is a relatively recent process and one that is still in progress. We start here to analyse how inclusion takes place in schools and how to best promote its objectives and determine the nature of the engagement that students achieve.



### Inclusion and the law

In Australian states there have been several Supreme Court cases that considered the issue of school inclusion. At least two recent cases have concerned the rights of a deaf child to attend their local school and participate equitably in the school's curriculum and out-of-class activities. The focus in these cases was not on the child's degree of hearing loss or specifically on their education achievements, but on the language used in classroom instruction and the communication modes available in the school to best support the child's inclusion, development and learning. Specifically, the plaintiffs claimed that Auslan, the sign language used by the Australian Deaf Community and part of Australia's National Language Policy, was the child's 'natural' language and should have been available to the child in the regular classroom to support their early communication access and subsequent achievements. The schools involved claimed that this was an unreasonable accommodation whereby the teachers and support staff would have had to acquire or provide a second language and develop a bilingual environment in their classrooms.

On the surface this can seem to be an issue of specific accommodation for a deaf learner, but there are many sub-issues that the courts and analysts of these cases found difficult to reconcile:

- 1 Does the court need to determine whether the child does, in fact, have proficiency in Auslan?\*
- 2 Does this language provide access to all areas of the curriculum and especially towards the achievement of literacy in English (an agreed national schools objective) and learning outcomes comparable with hearing students at the same year level?
- 3 What is the capacity of a state education authority to be able to provide a proficient model of Auslan in the classroom?
- 4 Would this accommodation mean that other non-English languages recognised under the National Language Policy should also be available for instruction in Australian classrooms? For example, very few schools in Australia use Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages, even though there are now a number of valuable resources and curricula available in these languages. There is significant evidence that use of 'mother tongue' in the early years of schooling provides a useful 'bridge' to literacy in English.

The states' Supreme Courts have typically ruled in a limited way under state anti-discrimination legislation and in the context of the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, but sufficiently enough to suggest that Auslan should be available to deaf students in regular schools in most Australian states and territories. Although courts cannot mandate the outcomes of such

a provision, as a consequence of anti-discrimination legislation Australian states now provide many regular classes with Auslan interpreters, communication aides, note-takers and teachers who have some degree of proficiency with this language.

\*Also it can be noted that currently more than 85 per cent of severely and profoundly deaf students in Australia have a cochlear implant which, without guaranteeing effectively normal hearing or eliminating the need for access to signed communication, may significantly enhance the potential for spoken language acquisition in adequate listening conditions. Further, more than 96 per cent of parents of deaf children use a spoken language at home.

- 1 To what extent is this story and the possible use of Auslan for instruction an example of effective inclusion?
- 2 Which principles of inclusion are involved and which aspects of current legislation and international agreements are reflected?

Pause  
and  
reflect

## Inclusion: what's in a word?

The word 'inclusion', when used in an educational context, continues to be somewhat paradoxical for many observers. Inclusion in its most general sense refers to the right to access and active participation and achieving equity through engagement in all aspects of daily life. The concept is founded in human rights principles and is evident in many of the international agreements that Australia is legally committed to.

Our rights may be seen as falling into three broad areas. First, we have *moral rights* that are justified on the basis of the ethical or moral values that we hold, or that our cultural communities accept. Second, we have *legal rights* that are enforceable in domestic law and in domestic or international courts. Third, we have *human rights* that are recognised in international law and conventions on the basis of a consensus within the international community that they are inherent among humanity.

There are, of course, overlaps among these categories as nations seek to encapsulate some of their ethical or moral beliefs in legal requirements, or as nations sign international agreements and by doing so are required to enact legislation to implement the principles of the signed agreement within their country. States that sign these international treaties have the obligation to respect them, protect those concerned and, importantly, fulfil their obligations under the treaties and conventions. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) was signed and ratified by all but two nations (Somalia and the United States). This binding Convention stipulates a child's right to participate in everyday events and opportunities, limits any attempts to restrict this right and is designed to protect children from forms of discrimination.

There are several other international conventions and agreements that contain guidelines that provide us with structural contexts, and even imperatives, depending on how influenced we are by the proclamations of these conventions and agreements. The perspectives of the Convention on the Rights of the Child apply in Australia, but so do those of the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO 1994), the World Education Forum (UNESCO 2000) and, most recently, the UN Convention on the Rights of

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Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly 2007), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and ratified in 2008. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which implements and monitors the national Australian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12, reflects these agreements and their implications for responding to diversity and provides a number of guidelines and resources for teachers.

Most of these Conventions concern students with a disability. However, before considering this specific group we need to consider the broader principles of equity, for equity is central to inclusion through education.

**Equity:** The achievement of outcomes that are equal.

In terms of understanding **equity** in education, one should consider four basic questions:

- 1 Do all individuals or groups have the same chance of progressing to a particular level in the education system and beyond?
- 2 Do all individuals enjoy equivalent learning conditions?
- 3 Do all students develop the skills and knowledge that are designated as the goals of the educational system?
- 4 Once they have left the education system, do individuals or groups have the same chances of using their acquired skills and knowledge to realise their potential in society?

These questions reveal the basis of equity—not only of equal opportunity or equal access, but also equity in terms of outcomes. This issue of outcomes is a most important one.

An internet search of the literature about diversity and inclusion in the context of schooling reveals that a large proportion of material relates to inclusion of students with ‘special education needs’ or with a learning ‘disability’ or ‘difficulty’. These terms are themselves in some degree of conflict with the meaning of inclusion as they can construct strong images of categorisation or deviance, if not appropriately understood and interpreted.

In this context, the meaning of inclusion is frequently confounded by earlier concepts of processes such as mainstreaming and integration. While authors may continue to disagree on the exact definition of these older terms and the distinctions among them, the following reflects a degree of consensus:

**Mainstreaming:** A term that originated under legal challenges for the rights of minority groups in the United States. Subsequent government legislation and direction mandated that many students formerly placed in special schools should be placed in local, regular schools. As such, mainstreaming focuses on the ‘place’ of the child with a disability or difference.

- 1 **Mainstreaming** was a term that originated under legal challenges for the rights of minority groups in the United States. It was originally regulated by the 1975 Public Law 94-142 and was then reauthorised by the US Congress in 1997 and 2004. Mainstreaming essentially focused on the ‘place’ of the child with a disability or difference. At the time students with African-American heritage were being further socially and culturally disadvantaged by frequently being placed in special education schools for students with intellectual impairments. The 1975 legislation was framed around the legal determination that their human rights required that they be placed in regular schools. These students were then ‘mainstreamed’ into US local schools. The term ‘mainstreaming’ was then adopted and proved to have influence beyond the United States and was also adopted with various interpretations by other countries, many of which did not have a Bill of Rights that underpinned the original motivation behind the US mainstreaming movement.
- 2 While **integration** implies that persons with a disability should be integrated into elements of mainstream society, in the educational context it is likely that students will have to evidence a measured degree of ability or capacity that is appropriate to their ‘fitting in’ to a regular school placement, rather than a school or school system being required to adapt to their needs. Definitions of ‘integration’ frequently involve professional judgments about the level of students’

**Integration:** The inclusion of people with a disability in educational institutions at a level commensurate with their degree of ability.

academic, social or personal achievements compared to agreed standards for their 'placement' in a local (regular) school (see, for example, Mirenda 1998). Processes of identification, assessment, ascertainment or appraisal of the potential for integration of children with a disability or difference are commonly found in associated education policy and practice. So, while integration is a process that provides a means of access for students with a disability or specific learning needs to find placement in regular schools, it is typically conditional upon those students meeting some set of agreed academic performance standards. It can be noted also that this process does not include consideration of the participation and outcomes of the placement, or indeed other aspects of the students' needs socially or emotionally.

- 3 Inclusion**, by contrast, assumes that a just state of affairs is one in which people with a disability or another form of human difference should be included in society from the outset, and in education in particular. The associated policy responses to this position are broad and comprehensive, and focus on the conditions necessary (or changes or adaptations to existing conditions) to include all individuals or groups and support the participation of children with a disability or difference in schools and in their communities (Foreman 2008).

**Inclusion:** A set of processes concerned with removing barriers to presence, participation and progress for all students.

As described, major national and international agreements, national legislation and curricula and policy further define and add imperatives for all state education systems to move towards this process of inclusion. Finally, effective inclusion has a number of components and the culmination of these is found in the outcomes experienced by the students themselves. This issue of outcomes can be judged by the nature and benefit of the academic and social engagement that these students are able to achieve in education.

## A United Nations perspective

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the most signed convention in UN history. It even exceeded the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the rapidity of its ratification. It was developed because a UN review showed existing UN human rights instruments have not protected people with disabilities from human rights abuses. It was believed that a separate convention was needed to make disability issues more visible within human rights, to ensure the circumstances of disabled people were addressed and to clarify countries' obligations and requirements. The Convention has been signed and legally ratified by almost all countries and came into effect in 2008. The instruments of the Convention are quite clear in relation to children with a disability, and to education in particular:

- 1 States that are signatories to the Convention shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.
- 2 Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability.
- 3 Children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.
- 4 Persons with disabilities [will] receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education.
- 5 Effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

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.